NEW, COMPLETE STORIES NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED

APR.
25 CENTS

MASKED RIDER WESTERN

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

ANC

FEATURING **GUN RIDERS OF SAHUARO**

A HARD-HITTING WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL By DEAN OWEN

LOOSE FALSE TEETH?

The makers of POLIDENT offer you Double Your Money Back unless this

Amazing New CREAM Holds Plates Tighter, Longer THAN ANYTHING YOU EVER TRIED

POLI·GRIP

Double Your Money Back Unless it Gives You

MORE COMFORT, MORE SECURITY THAN YOU EVER HAD BEFORE

Yes, the people who make Polident, the world's largest selling denture cleanser, are standing right behind their new adhesive cream, Poli-Grip, with an ironclad guarantee. You get double your money back, if Poli-Grip doesn't hold your plates tighter, longer than anything you've ever tried.

And that's not all. See if you don't find that Poli-Grip does all these wonderful things for you, too:

1. . . . form a cushion between your plate and gums to eliminate the friction that makes gums sore and raw.
2. . . . hold shallow lowers, despite lack of suction.
3. . . . seal the edges of plates so food particles can't get underneath to cause irritation.
4. . . . enable you to eat hard-to-chew foods in comfort, like steak, apples, celery, even corn-on-the-cob.
5. . . . give you full confidence to laugh, talk, sing without fear of embarrassment due to slipping plates.
6. hold plates tight even during strenuous sessions of coughing or sneezing.

Won't life be wonderful with all these torments behind you? Be sure to be among the first to learn the glorious comfort of holding loose false teeth tight and snug with Poli-Grip! Buy a tube at your drugstore as soon as possible.

Many tried powders, found they failed!

Read what they say about this* new *way:

"For ten years my teeth wouldn't stay tight for more than two hours a day. I tried powders, but nothing worked till your new *cream*, Poli-Grip, came along."
Mrs. T. W., Medfield, Mass.

"I like the cool taste of Poli-Grip and the smooth way it holds my teeth. It is easy to apply and holds tight for so long."
Mrs. L. W. N., Ottumwa, Iowa

"I found your new cream, Poli-Grip, very pleasant and mild-tasting and it held my loose plates very tight, longer than anything I've tried."
Mrs. H. D. M., Beadentown, Florida

"I like the wonderful holding strength of your new *cream* better than anything I've ever used. I like Poli-Grip's refreshing taste, too."
H. B. V., East Canaan, Conn.

"I definitely prefer Poli-Grip to other products I've tried. It holds my plate tighter and feels comfortable longer. Poli-Grip is cooling, soothing, never gritty."
Mrs. K. L., Los Angeles, Calif.

Made and GUARANTEED by the makers of POLIDENT

Get 'em both with one stone

Here's how: By taking a regular I. C. S. course, you can now earn *bonus credits* toward a high school diploma.

If you've never finished high school, it's a double break for you. You get the training you want in the subject you want. The same practical I. C. S. training used by industry itself to train workers and recognized by employers everywhere.

In addition, and without extra study or cost, you can earn up to one-half the credits required for an I. C. S. high school diploma while studying any regular course.

These valuable *bonus credits* make it doubly worth-while for you to find out more about the I. C. S. course that interests you. Marking and mailing the coupon will bring you complete information. Send it off *today!*

Remember, you'll be killing two birds with one stone.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

ICS

BOX 3970-W, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning ☐ Heating
- ☐ Plumbing ☐ Refrigeration
- ☐ Refrigeration, Domestic
- ☐ Refrigeration & Air Conditioning
- ☐ Steam Fitting

Aeronautics Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting & Design
- ☐ Aircraft Mechanic
- ☐ Engine Mechanic

Automotive Courses
- ☐ Automobile ☐ Auto Technician
- ☐ Auto Electric Technician
- ☐ Auto Body Rebuilding & Refinishing

Chemical Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Food-Plant Sanitation
- ☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering and Architectural Courses
- ☐ Architecture ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Bridge and Building Foreman
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Radio, General ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing ☐ Television
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician

Diesel Engines Courses
- ☐ Diesel Engines
- ☐ Internal Combustion Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Forging ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Locomotive Machinist
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman
- ☐ Steam-Diesel Locomotive Eng.

Stationary Engineering Courses
- ☐ Power Plant Engineering
- ☐ Stationary Fireman
- ☐ Stationary Steam Engineering

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Loom Fixing ☐ Rayon Mfg.
- ☐ Textile Engineering
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Law ☐ Cartooning
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Fashion & Book Illustration
- ☐ Federal Tax ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ Good English ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Personnel—Labor Relations
- ☐ Postal Civil Service ☐ Retailing
- ☐ Retail Business Management
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Present Position_____ Employed by_____

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

MASKED RIDER
WESTERN

Vol. XXXI, No. 2 APRIL, 1952 A THRILLING PUBLICATION

A COMPLETE WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL

GUN RIDERS OF SAHUARO.....DEAN OWEN 12
With revolution brewing, the Mex Border wasn't healthy for strangers—or for the Masked Rider

NOVELETS

HELL'S STRAWBOSS.....T. C. McCLARY 62
Getting thrown in the Hole meant certain death

TROUBLE IN THE NORTH.....TOM ROAN 80
Smith was after something far better than gold

SHORT STORIES

ACHAK, THE FOX.....H. F. CRUICKSHANK 55
—had lost her mate, and had to fight on alone

TRAIL HERD.....HARRISON COLT 91
Why did Garret use a name that wasn't his own?

ROUGH AND WILD.....DE WITT NEWBURY 100
Grady was hell when happy—and hell when riled

INCHYLODDY.....SYL MacDOWELL 108
The camp hash-slinger had a few tricks cooking

WHEN THE FOG LIFTED.....ALLAN K. ECHOLS 118
Renfrow came to Pinetop—to spill some blood!

FEATURES

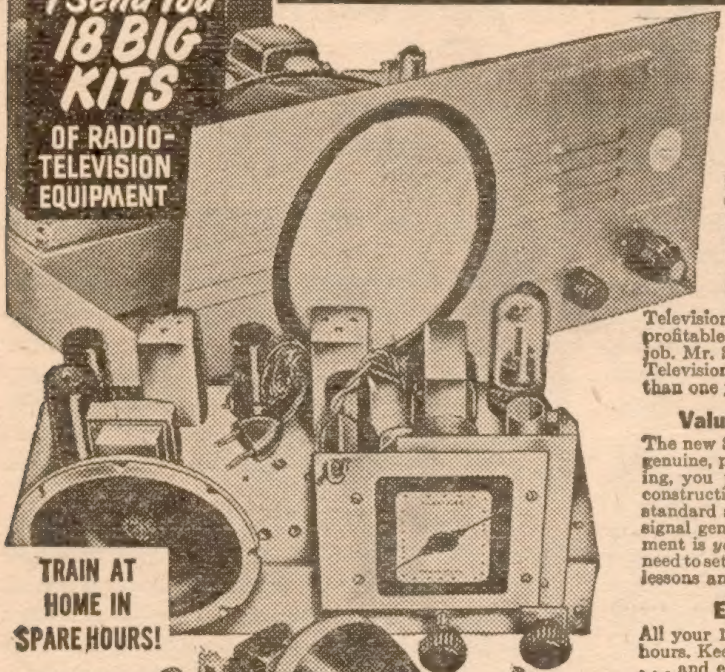
THE HORSE CORRAL.....NELSON C. NYE 6
LASSO LARRUPS.....HAROLD HELFER 11
RIDING THE RANGE (Verse).....CECILE BONHAM 43
THE UNSEEN NEIGHBOR.....JACK BENTON 78
WANNA BUY A RANCH?.....JACKSON COLE 79
ACCIDENT OF BIRTH.....M. E. DAVID 99

DAVID X. MANNERS
Editor

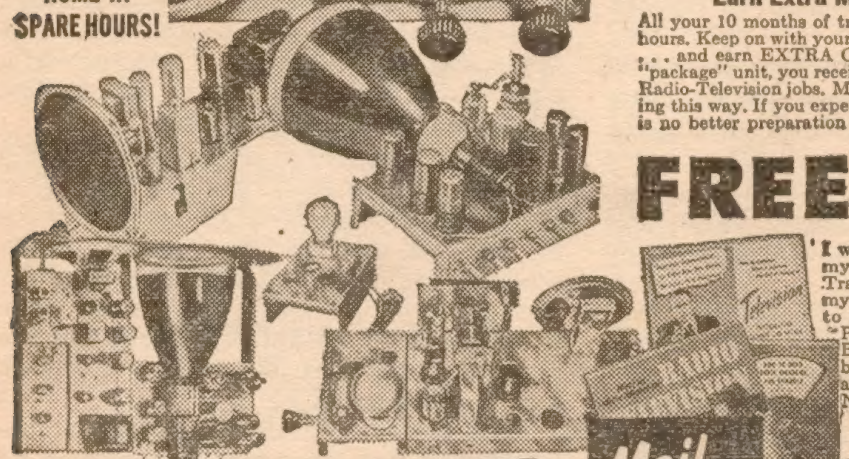
MASKED RIDER WESTERN. Published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Copyright, 1952, by Better Publications, Inc. Subscription (12 issues), $3.00, single copies, 25 cents. Foreign postage extra. Re-entered as second-class matter July 26, 1951, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. In corresponding with this publication, please include your postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used it is a coincidence. April, 1952. Printed in the U. S. A.

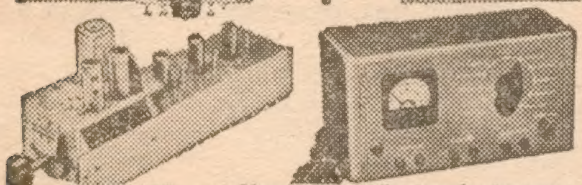
NOW-Be a Fully Trained, Qualified RADIO TELEVISION TECHNICIAN IN JUST 10 MONTHS OR LESS!

I Send You 18 BIG KITS OF RADIO-TELEVISION EQUIPMENT



TRAIN AT HOME IN SPARE HOURS!





IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCED IN RADIO

Men already in Radio who seek a short intensive 100% TELEVISION Training with FULL EQUIPMENT INCLUDED are invited to check and mail the coupon at the right.

New "Package" Unit Training Plan—Pay As You Learn—You Set The Pace!—No Monthly Payment Contract to Sign!—Train at Home in Spare Hours!

Now . . . be ready for Radio-Television's big pay opportunities in a few short MONTHS! Frank L. Sprayberry's completely new "Package" training unit plan prepares you in just 10 MONTHS . . . or even less! There is NO monthly payment contract to sign . . . thus NO RISK to you! This is America's finest, most complete, practical training—gets you ready to handle any practical job in the booming Radio-Television industry. In just 10 months you may start your own profitable Radio-Television shop . . . or accept a good paying job. Mr. Sprayberry has trained hundreds of successful Radio-Television technicians—and stands ready to train you in less than one year, even if you have no previous experience!

Valuable Equipment Included With Training

The new Sprayberry "package" plan includes many big kits of genuine, professional Radio-Television equipment. While training, you perform over 300 demonstrations, experiments and construction projects. In addition, you build a powerful 6-tube standard and short wave radio set, a multi-range test meter, a signal generator, signal tracer, many other projects. All equipment is *yours to keep* . . . you have practically everything you need to set up your own service shop. The Sprayberry book-bound lessons and other training materials . . . all are yours to keep.

Earn Extra Money While You Learn!

All your 10 months of training is AT YOUR HOME in spare hours. Keep on with your present job and income while learning . . . and earn EXTRA CASH in addition. With each training "package" unit, you receive extra plans and ideas for spare time Radio-Television jobs. Many students pay for their entire training this way. If you expect to be in the armed forces later, there is no better preparation than good Radio-Television training.

FREE 3 BIG RADIO-TELEVISION BOOKS

I want you to have ALL the facts about my new 10-MONTH Radio-Television Training—without cost! Rush coupon for my three big Radio-Television books: "How to Make Money in Radio-Television," PLUS my new illustrated Television Bulletin PLUS an actual sample Sprayberry Lesson—all FREE. No obligation and no salesman will call. Mail coupon NOW! I will rush all three books at once!

Sprayberry Academy of Radio, Dept. 5-H
111 North Canal St. Chicago 6, Ill.

Mail Coupon Today!

NO OBLIGATION
No Salesman Will Call

SPRAYBERRY ACADEMY OF RADIO, Dept. 5-H
111 North Canal St., Chicago 6, Ill.

Please rush to me all information on your 10-MONTH Radio-Television Training Plan. I understand this does not obligate me and that no salesman will call upon me.

Name.....Age.....

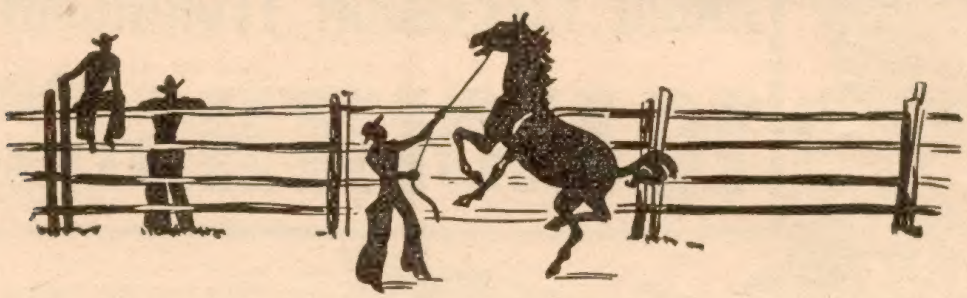
Address.....

City.....Zone....State.....

Please Check Below About Your Experience

☐ Are You Experienced? ☐ No Experience

THE HORSE CORRAL



Conducted by NELSON C. NYE

2. A Horse They Named "Top Man"

SAM HOUSTON, who got the presidency of Texas after his defeat of Santa Ana, was a man who believed that performance comes solely from bloodlines. He affirmed this belief when he purchased from Edward Parker of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1839, a short horse, son of the celebrated Sir Archy.

This chestnut, ten years old at the time, was called Copper Bottom and he amply verified Houston's judgment. Having speed to spare, he passed it along in such generous measure that his progeny became famous from Sherman to Galveztown.

Unfortunately much of the very best of his stock ultimately found its way into the hands of men who believed that racing ruined horses for cow work. Their fame gradually died, their value declined, their great quality was forgotten so that in time it became difficult to locate a horse from the Copper Bottom line.

In the 1880s, Col. C. T. Herring was breeding Copper Bottom horses in Hill County, Texas. A young man in his employ, R. L. Underwood—now of Wichita Falls—went all out to save this line.

From one of Herring's ranches Underwood secured the copper colored stallion, Golden Chief, which probably had more Copper Bottom blood in his veins than any other Quarter Horse living at that time. He was a direct descendant of Sam Houston's stallion.

The greatest of his progeny is, in my opinion, the eight-year-old brown stallion owned by Harvey Matlock of Pendleton, Oregon.

Matlock became interested in Quarter Horses because of their extensive use in rodeo. He says, "When some of them Southern boys came into this country riding those cool-headed, fast little fellows, it didn't take me long to decide if I aimed to continue roping against them I had better get mounted."

He wrote to R. L. Underwood and other Texas breeders and eventually did business with B. E. Brooks of San Angelo. Brooks' top stud was the Underwood-bred Top Flight, sired by Golden Chief. In 1944, Matlock bought a thirteen-month-old colt by that horse which Brooks had prophetically named Top Man.

Matlock's purchase of him was effected by mail. He says: "The colt arrived in Pendleton around midnight, and we were so danged excited we hardly knew whether we were coming or going. We had no way of hauling him so my wife drove me to town and I led him the five miles home on foot. We almost slept with him the first week."

They raised him almost as one of the family and had him practically broken by the time he was two. Matlock led his children around on the colt almost every day and when he was big enough for a grown man to ride there was nothing left to do but get on him.

Matlock had purchased the horse to make a calf roper out of him and at two he started his training. After he had the

colt reining and stopping well, he concentrated on getting him to work a rope and then to back up properly before he ever took him near cattle. He then began to follow some old cows around on him, walking him for days, then stepping him up to a canter until that dadburned colt would practically follow a cow up a tree.

Then Matlock went to chasing cows in an arena until he had Top Man breaking out of a barrier and tailing the calf all the way. For several months Matlock never touched a rope. He wanted this Quarter Horse to get to the top and was willing to take all the time the colt needed.

He says, "The biggest mistake I made with this horse was wholly unintentional. A friend needed help to round up his cattle and, being tickled at the chance to work my colt, I took him over. This friend allowed we ought to be back by noon; and also said I could ride the bottoms and in this way keep things easy for the colt.

"So we went to work, gathering cows and calfs. The boys on top would push them down to me and I would shove them on down the canyon. By ten o'clock we had the gather headed for the ranch. Before long, however, the calves began dropping into the drag, and cows would break back to see what cooked with their young uns.

"To cut a long story short, we lost that herd twice and had to go clean back for the critters. Finally we lost them entirely and didn't make the ranch till around nine that night. I had a mighty tired colt and even though I'd walked him most of the way after losing the cattle, I almost had to pack him.

"The next morning he was too sore to ride and wind-puffed so bad I have never succeeded in completely ridding him of the tendency."

Harvey says, about Top Man on calf roping. "He has the most natural stop I ever saw on a horse. When he sets down on a calf, he irons it out proper. . . . Top Man continually surprises me. He hands me a thrill every time he breaks a barrier; no matter how well I'm set, he pops my head back.

"I never thought much about racing this horse. Not being used to Quarter Horses I never thought roping and racing would mix—at least, not with advantage. But I

[*Turn page*]

TO PEOPLE Who Want To Write

but can't get started

Do you have that constant urge to write but fear that a beginner hasn't a chance? Then listen to what the former editor of Liberty said on this subject:

"There is more room for newcomers in the writing field today than ever before. Some of the greatest of writing men and women have passed from the scene in recent years. Who will take their places? Who will be the new Robert W. Chambers, Edgar Wallace, Rudyard Kipling? Fame, riches and the happiness of achievement await the new men and women of power."

SELLS FOUR ARTICLES AT BEGINNING OF COURSE

"Before I had finished the third assignment, I sold four articles that have brought in over twice the cost of the complete course. Had anyone told me when I began the N.I.A. Course, that I could do that, I would have considered him crazy." — Walter F. Roper, 95 Benedict Terrace, Longmeadow, Mass.

Writing Aptitude Test — FREE!

THE Newspaper Institute of America offers a free Writing Aptitude Test. Its object is to discover new recruits for the army of men and women who add to their income by fiction and article writing. The Writing Aptitude Test is a simple but expert analysis of your latent ability, your powers of imagination, logic, etc. Not all applicants pass this test. Those who do are qualified to take the famous N. I. A. course based on the *practical* training given by big metropolitan dailies.

This is the New York Copy Desk Method which teaches you to write by writing. You develop your *individual* style instead of trying to copy that of others. Although you work at home, on your own time, you are constantly guided by experienced writers. You "cover" actual assignments such as metropolitan reporters get. It is really fascinating work. Each week you see new progress. In a matter of months you can acquire the coveted "professional" touch. Then you're ready for market with greatly improved chances of making sales.

Mail the Coupon Now

But the first step is to take the FREE Writing Aptitude Test. It requires but a few minutes and costs nothing. So mail the coupon now. Make the first move towards the most enjoyable and profitable occupation — writing for publication! Newspaper Institute of America, One Park Avenue, New York 16, N. Y. (Founded 1925)

VETERANS: COURSE APPROVED FOR VETERANS' TRAINING!

Free

Newspaper Institute of America
One Park Ave., New York 16, N. Y.

Send me, without cost or obligation, your Writing Aptitude Test and further information about writing for profit.

Mr.
Mrs.
Miss .....

Address.....

(All correspondence confidential. No salesman will call on you.) 94-D-662

Copyright 1951, Newspaper Institute of America.

can tell you now I just didn't know real Quarter Horses. If anything, racing has helped his arena work."

Every year the Southeast Washington State Fair puts on a rodeo, and in the fall of '47, for the first time in its history, they had Quarter Horse racing but for registered stock only.

"Top Man," Harvey says, "due to roping, is usually in pretty good shape, but when I decided to enter him for those races, I reckoned a little training wouldn't hurt him. My method was quite similar to the one you laid out in an article recently. I would gallop him a lot and then, every few days, blow him out for about three hundred yards, walk him a couple days and then repeat.

"When we got to the fair, my wife and I were sure plumb excited. We had never run Top Man before and had never clocked him. I just *thought* he was fast—I wasn't at all sure that he could outrun anything.

"We got the blue ribbon in the aged stallion class, but when he showed for Grand Champ, the judge marked him down for wind puffs and splints. He told me these blemishes was all that kept my horse from taking the works. This show took place sometime during the morning, and my horse was due to run the first thing after lunch.

"Only four Quarter Horses proved eligible. There was a little One-eyed Waggoner mare from Walla Walla, a studhorse called Headlight that was claimed to be right good at throwing the dirt back, my horse, and also a stallion from Arizona.

"My horse got away on top and stayed that way. He ran that quarter in 26:2 which doesn't sound like much but you should have seen that 'track.' It had one curve in it, no kind of surface and the horses were started sixty feet back of the line, the general idea being that that would be fairer since they hadn't any starting gate.

"They were supposed to have an elimination contest the first two days of this shindig, winning nags to run Saturday for the Quarter Mile championship. But, Quarter Horse racing being so young in this country, there weren't enough eligibles for another race.

"Several of the rodeo boys had Quarter Horses which they figured could beat mine, only they didn't have any papers. There were thoroughbred races at this meet also, so these birds got their heads together and talked the management into making that big race Saturday an open one.

"I wasn't too hot for this idea but I didn't see how I could back out then, so the Saturday race ended up with seven entries. Top Man was the only registered Quarter Horse in it, and I sure wasn't feeling too good, I can tell you. A guy named McBee had got in with a paperless gelding from Arizona, and I knew I was sunk because I'd seen this hide run the month before at the White Salmon Fair, and every gent there, including me, didn't think he could be beat for sour apples. Just before the start McBee came up and wanted to bet $200 his horse would walk all over mine, and I didn't have the guts to call him.

" Well, I guess you know how hard it is to get seven horses off without a starting gate. There was several false starts and considerable cussing and when they finally fired the gun, my horse was left at the post —and I mean left.

"When they went into the first curve, Top Man was a very bad last. I felt lower than a snake's belly. But there was nothing I could do but grit my teeth, though I sure enough wanted to get out there and push him. When they came into the home stretch, he was still last in line, and I told the Missus that we might just as well pack.

"I guess my jock was smarter than I was. Suddenly I seen him go to the bat, and you could hear him swatting that horse all over. Top Man laid his ears back, stuck out his jaw and, brother—was it a horse race! Boy, I tell you it was a real thrill to see that little brown horse pass horses right and left to cross the line half a length ahead of McBee's gelding that had led all the way.

"I would not have taken the whole Empire State for Top Man right then—I damn near cried, I was so proud of that horse! And then, to top it all off, that night in the calf roping he worked better than he ever had. I tell you, I was really blowed up on that horse!" ● ● ●

$100.00 A WEEK in CASH
PAID DIRECT TO YOU

FAMILY HOSPITAL PLAN

SAVE MONEY!
There's a big advantage to buying this policy by mail. This method of selling is less costly for us—and that's another reason why we are able to offer so much protection for so little money.

Policy Pays for a Day, a Week, a Month, a Year—*just as long as necessary for you to be hospitalized!*

JUST LOOK
The Large Benefit This Low Cost Policy Provides!

The Service Life Family Hospital Plan covers you and your family for about everything—for *every* accident, and for *all* common and rare diseases after the policy has been in force 30 days or more. Very serious disease such as cancer, tuberculosis, heart disease, diseases involving female organs, sickness resulting in a surgical operation, hernia, lumbago and sacroiliac conditions originating after the policy is in force six months are all covered . . . Hospitalization caused by attempted suicide, use of intoxicants or narcotics, insanity, and venereal disease is naturally excluded.

The money is all yours—for any purpose you want to use it. There are no hidden meanings or big words in the policy. We urge you and every family and also individuals to send for this policy on our 10 day free trial offer—and be convinced that no other hospital plan offers you so much for your $1.00 a month!

TWO SPECIAL FEATURES

MATERNITY
Benefits At Small Extra Cost
Women who will some day have babies will want to take advantage of a special low cost maternity rider. Pays $50.00 for childbirth confinement either in the hospital or at home, after policy has been in force 10 months. Double the amount on twins.

POLIO
Benefits At No Extra Cost
In lieu of other regular benefits policy pays these benefits if polio strikes—
For Hospital Bills, up to $500.00
For Doctor's Bills while in the hospital, up to $500.00
For Orthopedic Appliances, up to $500.00
TOTAL OF $1,500.00

3c A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY
for this outstanding new Family Protection

Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70! When sickness or accident sends you or a member of your family to the hospital—this policy PAYS $100.00 PER WEEK for a day, a month, even a year . . . or just as long as you stay in the hospital. What a wonderful feeling to know your savings are protected and you won't have to go into debt. The money is paid DIRECT TO YOU to spend as you wish. This remarkable new Family Hospital Protection costs only 3c a day for each adult 18 to 59 years of age, and for age 60 to 70 only 4½c a day. This policy even covers children up to 18 years of age with cash benefits of $50.00 a week while in the hospital—yet the cost is only 1½c a day for each child! Benefits paid while confined to any recognized hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes and clinics, spas or sanitariums. Pick your own doctor. Naturally this wonderful policy is issued only to individuals and families now in good health; otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected, you are covered for about every sickness or accident. Persons covered may return as often as necessary to the hospital within the year.

This is What $100.00 a Week Can Mean to You When in the Hospital for Sickness or Accident

Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills and maybe the surgeon's bill too . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on. What a Godsend this READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU. Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay you for time lost from your job or business. Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you.

Examine This Policy Without Cost or Obligation—Read It—Talk It Over—Then Decide

10 DAYS FREE EXAMINATION

You are invited to inspect this new kind of Family Hospital Plan. We will send the actual policy to you for ten days at no cost or obligation. Talk it over with your banker, doctor, lawyer or spiritual adviser. Then make up your mind. This policy backed by the full resources of the nationally known Service Life Insurance Company of Omaha, Nebraska—organized under the laws of Nebraska and with policyholders in every state. SEND NO MONEY—just your name and address! No obligation, of course!

REMEMBER—$100.00 A WEEK CASH BENEFIT IS ACTUALLY $14.25 PER DAY!

FREE INSPECTION . . . MAIL COUPON
The Actual Policy Will Come to You at Once Without Cost or Obligation

The Service Life Insurance Company
Hospital Department S-17, Omaha 2, Nebraska
Please rush the new Family Hospital Protection Plan Policy to me on 10 days Free Inspection. I understand that I am under no obligation.

Name.....

Address.....

City or Town.....*State*.....

THE SERVICE LIFE FAMILY HOSPITAL PLAN

SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
Assets of $13,188,604.16 as of January 1, 1951
Hospital Department S-17, Omaha 2, Nebraska

ROD TRAPPED THE POACHER AND THEN...

WHEN ROD BROWN, DEPUTY GAME WARDEN AND WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER, RIGGED HIS FLASH CAMERA ON A STATE PRESERVE DEER TRAIL, HE LITTLE EXPECTED A POACHER TO SET IT OFF.

HIDING NEARBY, ROD SEES THE FLASH AND COMES TO RESET THE CAMERA, BUT THEN...

LATER AT STATE PARK HEADQUARTERS

WHAT A PICTURE! LET'S CALL IN THE REPORTERS
I'M A FINE-LOOKING SIGHT TO BE INTERVIEWED. HAVEN'T SHAVED SINCE FRIDAY
WE CAN FIX YOU UP WITH A RAZOR

THREE HOURS PASS

FOR FAST, CLEAN, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES AT A SAVING, TRY THIN GILLETTES. NO OTHER BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD ARE SO KEEN AND SO LONG LASTING. BECAUSE THEY'RE MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, THIN GILLETTES PROTECT YOU FROM NICKS AND IRRITATION. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT TEN-BLADE PACKAGE
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢

TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

Lasso Larrups

by Harold Helfer

THE USE of bloodhounds by General Zachary Taylor for tracking down redskins during Indian Wars caused almost as much resentment as the dropping of the atom bomb during World War II. Our rugged ancestors were appalled at what they considered to be the inhuman sicing animals on fellow human beings even in a war.

BILLY THE KID, the notorious outlaw, is believed to have started his crime career when only 12 by killing a man in a fight at Silver City, New Mexico.

IN 1862, at New Ulm, Minn., an Indian attack was averted with stove pipes. The pipes were pointed in the direction the Indians were coming. At proper intervals, anvils were banged upon. Convinced they were contending with cannons, the Indians turned around and went away.

OLD-TIME CATTLE RUSTLERS had nothing much on an Uruguayan character. Caught red-handed recently, he confessed to having stolen 4000 head of cattle in the course of two decades and buying three houses in Montevideo with the proceeds.

A MISSOULA, MONT., motorist never has to lock his car when he takes his pet cat along for a ride downtown. His "pet cat" is a six-foot mountain lion.

THE CHURCH at Urem, Utah, earned for itself more than $1000 the other day by pitching a buffalo meat banquet. The giant of the plains was bagged by Wilford C. Larson in Utah's Wayne County and he turned it over to the church.

THE SADDLE-HORSE population of the U. S. is estimated at about 450,000, more than half of which are on western ranges.

IN 1540, Don Lopez de Cardenas, searching for the sea, came upon the Grand Canyon, the first white man to behold it. Last year, 410 years later, 688,673 entered the Grand Canyon park, a record number.

THERE ARE MORE motion picture theaters in Texas than in any other state.

DURING the squirrel plague in 1808, some frontier sections passed laws requiring each male over 21 to produce one hundred squirrel scalps or pay $3 in cash.

A FOUR-HORNED SHEEP was found at Owl Creek Mountain in Wyoming. The strange part was that two of the horns were those of wild mountain sheep, the other two those of domestic sheep.

IN 1842, Santa Anna, the Mexican general, chose one-tenth of the 160 captured Texans for execution by making them draw blindfolded from a jar which contained 160 beans—16 of which were black.

AT ROTAN, TEX., after he'd killed a rattlesnake behind the barn, Coe Hawkings went out in the dark and cut off the rattles for a souvenir—only to discover the next morning that the snake he had killed still had its rattles!

With revolution brewing, the Mex Border wasn't a healthy place for strangers—and a lynch tree was already set for the Masked Rider!

CHAPTER I

Stranger in the Sangres

ALTHOUGH there appeared to be no trail where the ramparts of the Sangre de Dios Mountains parted a thousand feet above the valley floor, a horse and rider were descending the precipitous granite cliff.

There was a trail of sorts, a twisting snake track worn smooth by the hoofs of mounts that carried those who lived by the gun. In this forgotten corner of the Territory, a stranger was looked upon with equal suspicion by the law and by those who found a haven in the isolation of tumbled stone that was the Sangre de Dios country.

Particularly would a rider such as the one moving down to Alameda Valley be watched with interest. His garb was the casual dress of the drifter—high peaked hat, faded shirt and levis. But there was something about the ease with which he sat the saddle of his hammerhead roan, despite the dangerously steep trail, that caught the eye. His beltguns, slung from a narrow waist, would be of interest to a professional observer, for there was a

A NOVEL BY DEAN OWEN

GUN RIDERS

Now, faced by this masked man, Kane knew he had to fight or die

OF SAHUARO

certain hang to the holsters that showed this stranger knew how to obtain maximum efficiency from his weapons.

A Mexican woodcutter, watching the rider from the doorway of his mud and ocotillo-pole shack, considered him with the pessimism of an old man who had watched his neighbors die under the guns of night riders. And even now there was the threat of terror abroad, rumors that once more the Mexican side of the Border would be swept by revolution.

To that old man, Paulo Ramos, any man who traveled from the north by this rough and dangerous trail wanted to arrive unobserved. Otherwise would he not take the stage road into Sahuaro?

But to the rider—Wayne Morgan, wandering waddy—the explanation was simple. His partner, an Indian named Blue Hawk, was visiting his Yaqui brethren at their encampment in the Sangres.

With the coming of the new moon, Blue Hawk would meet Morgan at a secret camp in the mountains. Until that time Morgan had a mission of his own. And he had no wish to spoil this all too infrequent opportunity Blue Hawk had to visit his own people.

MORGAN had a distinct purpose in coming to Alameda Valley and the Border town of Sahuaro. The reason was a piece of folded paper he carried in his shirt pocket. Only yesterday he had seen the first notice when he and Blue Hawk had entered the rugged Sangres. The square of paper carried a message in bold type. The black printing was indelible in Morgan's mind:

MASKED RIDER. IMPORTANT YOU SEE DAVE SANFORD. GENERAL DELIVERY SAHUARO.

That afternoon he and Blue Hawk had found two more of these notices. Blue Hawk had insisted that he be allowed to accompany his partner and learn the meaning of this Dave Sanford's urgent invitation to the Masked Rider. But Morgan had laughed it off. It was the work of a crank, he said, or someone stupid enough to think he could lure the Masked Rider into a trap.

But in spite of his assurances, Wayne Morgan, as the alter ego of the Masked Rider, the West's Robin Hood outlaw, sensed that these notices he had found meant one thing—someone needed help.

As the roan reached the valley floor, Morgan's eyes narrowed against a flash of light high on a rim of the Sangres. Several times during his perilous descent he had noticed that same flash of light, and knew someone watched him through binoculars, the sun's reflection caught in the lenses. Grimly he smiled and swung the roan toward a mud-roofed shack where an old Mexican wearing a tattered straw hat stood in the doorway. Two burros in an ocotillo pole corral dozed in the sunlight.

As Morgan drew up in the dusty yard, the Mexican slammed the door.

Surprised at the discourtesy, Morgan's eyes caught sight of a white square of paper nailed to a stump, bearing the same message as the notice he carried in his shirt pocket. This Dave Sanford, whoever he was, must want the Masked Rider pretty badly, Morgan reflected.

Hola!" he yelled at the shack, but the Mexican did not answer his greeting. Frowning, Morgan saw the old man standing behind an open window, the twin barrels of an ancient shotgun laid across the sill.

The strange actions of the Mexican told Morgan plainly that fear held this range in its grip. The guns of the Masked Rider were needed here, guns that long ago had been dedicated to the cause of justice, righting wrongs, defending the unfortunate, the persecuted and the underdogs.

Again he turned his eyes toward the Sangres where he had seen the flash of light. No light there now. The watcher had probably taken the news of a strange rider's appearance in the valley to some interested party. Could that party be Dave Sanford?

Morgan shrugged his shoulders, saying aloud, *"Quien sabe?"* and urged the roan along the trail to Sahuaro. . . .

From a vantage point above a high-walled natural bowl in the Sangres, a

tough puncher named Clint Guthrie had spotted a rider moving downtrail. For some time he had studied the rider through binoculars, seeing he was tall, dressed like a range bum, and riding a roan. Probably no one important, but Denver Kane had said to watch for any strangers.

There were only two entrances to Alameda Valley, the stage route to the east, and this old outlaw trail the stranger rode. Anybody who risked his neck on that trail was either shaking off the dust of some sheriff or carrying a badge in his boot.

Two trails into Alameda Valley? There were others, but only Clint Guthrie and men of his breed knew of them. A raw-boned man with a red face that would never tan, Guthrie sheathed his field-glasses and sent his gelding down the rocky slant to the entrance of the blind canyon.

BEFORE him half a dozen log shacks were clustered about a huge pole corral that held more than three hundred head of horses. So far as Guthrie knew only Denver Kane, his boss, and the men who rode for him knew about this canyon. A lot of other people would like to know about it. Some of the big horse ranchers, for instance.

Dismounting before one of the shacks, Guthrie yelled, "Sheffield!"

Luke Sheffield, Kane's foreman, was chewing a piece of steak. Telling Guthrie to enter, he narrowed his eyes against the big rider's face. He didn't like Guthrie. The man hadn't been with Denver Kane's Wagonwheel outfit for long. Only a month.

WAYNE MORGAN

Before this, Sheffield had tested every man Kane hired. Somehow he had neglected to test Guthrie. Sheffield wondered if he might be getting soft in the belly. The thought angered him and he lifted his eyes from the freshly-oiled .44 Guthrie wore at his belt. He knew the rider also carried a revolver under his shirt. A man to watch, this Guthrie.

Guthrie gave the foreman an indolent smile and sat down on the edge of the table.

"Rider heading down the north trail. Thought you better maybe have a look." Reaching over Sheffield's plate, Guthrie helped himself to a fist-full of fried potatoes.

Sheffield's eyes thinned. "Don't ever do that when I got an ax handy. Or you'll be minus a hand."

Guthrie laughed, and the sound only further enraged Sheffield. Knowing now was not the time for a showdown with this insolent cowhand, Sheffield snatched the field-glasses from Guthrie and, mounting his horse, went spurring to the lookout. For several minutes he studied the rider on the roan, now far down the trail. Then, sheathing the glasses, he returned to camp.

He yelled out some names and riders appeared from shacks and saddled up. He signaled out two of the biggest men in camp.

"Dobe, you and Mileaway stay in Sahuaro. That stranger's probably headin' there. Look him over. Kane's been worried that maybe some of the ranchers have sent for a U.S. marshal. If the stranger's got a badge pinned to his undershirt, make sure you bury him with it."

Mileaway Jones and Dobie Gilson swung into their saddles.

Clint Guthrie said, "What about the boys who are bringing in those horses? They're about due here."

"They'll get through," Sheffield growled. "It'll take more'n one stranger to throw them boys off their feed."

As they moved out of the canyon, leaving guards at the single entrance of the bowl, Sheffield said, "We'll have to shake it, boys! Kane is meeting us at the ranch. The sheriff is due to take that Dave Sanford hombre to Binford for the hanging. He'll leave about three. We'll just have time to meet the boss, ride to Rustler Pass, and get a rope around Sanford's neck."

"And when we hang Sanford, it'll be good-by, Masked Rider," Mileaway Jones said, and laughed deep in his thick chest.

As they moved down a secret trail, Guthrie drew abreast of Sheffield, his sunburned face suddenly crafty. "We got some prime horse flesh back there," he said mildly. "But what in hell are we going to do with 'em?"

"Wish I knew," Sheffield grunted, and rubbed a deep scar on his right cheek.

Guthrie chuckled. "Thought you was Kane's boy. Seems like the boss ought to tell you what's up."

Unable to trust his voice, Sheffield made no reply. It was one thing that rankled him as Kane's foreman. He never knew what in hell was going on.

CHAPTER II

"Sanford Is the Masked Rider!"

SURROUNDED by the formidable Sangres, Alameda Valley seemed completely isolated from the rest of the Territory. To the south lay Mexico, to the north a thousand canyons where a man could hide.

Wayne Morgan kept a steady pace as he followed a trail along the base of the mountains. He was just emerging from a mesquite thicket at the edge of a draw when he saw a band of eight horses moving along the stony ground. A lover of horses, Morgan halted the roan, awed by the sheer beauty of these prize mounts that obviously had been bred for stamina as well as show.

He was enjoying the sight when suddenly he felt a wash of warm air across his cheek. A rifle cracked an instant later deep in the draw. Startled, the roan lunged, making the second shot miss its target by a half-dozen yards. Angrily Morgan wheeled his mount into a nest of rocks.

At the first shot, Wayne Morgan's guns had appeared with magic swiftness into his brown hands. Now he sat his saddle, peering over the rocks. He saw two riders down in the draw, a black-haired man and a squat horseman who held a rifle. They were gesturing toward his hiding

place, apparently undecided whether to close in on him or go after the horses. The animals had been spooked by the shots, and were now scattered the length of the draw.

Sensing the riders might think he was a lookout for a gang of rustlers, Morgan holstered one of his guns. Standing up in the stirrups, he lifted his right hand, palm outward in the rangeland gesture of peace, to show them he had no intention of harming this obviously valuable herd of horses.

However, the gesture did not check the trigger fingers of the men in the draw. A blast of rifle fire swept over Morgan's barricade. Ducking the hail of lead, he drew his Winchester from a saddle-boot. He'd dust these hombres; firing on a man without learning his identity or his intentions.

He sent two bullets high into the air, for he had no wish to chance wounding one of the horses. The two riders and their mounts were out of sight around a bend in the draw by the time he rode into the open.

For a moment Morgan was sorely tempted to take out after them and teach the pair a lesson. But he had other business in this valley. Reluctantly shoving the rifle back in leather, he again headed down the Sahuaro trail.

After a time, from where the trail widened from its wheel track width, Morgan saw the town of Sahuaro. Adobe and frame structures bunched along either side of the street, showed the mark of heat and the occasional fierce storms that whipped sand in great clouds and tore paint from lumber as if by a giant file.

In the sparse shade of an arcade, Morgan saw men on a long bench watching him as he rode slowly through the yellow dust. To them he was just a tall stranger on a hammerheaded roan, his clothing showing the marks of hard trails.

At the livery he paid for grain and a stall. Then, passing the Ajax Saloon, he peered over the batwings. A saloon was the logical place to make inquiries; it was also the logical place to find trouble if those inquiries became too personal.

Morgan crossed the street, kicking his way through the dust. The men on the bench watched him as town loafers will at the tag end of the day, finding in him a new subject for speculation.

Suddenly he was aware that as they looked beyond him, their faces had tightened. Slowing his pace, he turned to see that two men had stepped out of the Ajax and were standing in the doorway. Big men, both as tall as Morgan himself.

ONE of them had a blunt nose, as if a fist or a thrown bottle had flattened it in some barroom brawl. His companion, chewing a quill pick, had tipped back his hat, exposing a shock of hair that was the shade of rusty iron. They were different in their dress, one going in for fancy breeches and shirt, the other running to faded denims. One thing in common was the gun at the belt of each. They watched Morgan coldly.

Deliberately Morgan turned his back on them and entered the Mercantile.

There would be no purpose in making an issue out of the way the hard-eyed pair across the street were staring, Morgan had decided.

A bald man behind the Mercantile counter—Jake Pilson—said, "You must be right important-looking, stranger. Anyhow, Dobe and Mileaway seem to think so."

He indicated the pair in the saloon doorway. They appeared to be arguing.

A brown-haired girl at the counter was giving Jake Pilson a list of goods she wanted. She was small, dainty, even though she wore levis molded to hip and thigh, and a checked shirt. She frowned at the men across the street, then turned troubled hazel eyes on Morgan.

"If you've got any sense," she told him severely, "you'll get out the back door and ride."

Morgan shrugged, noting how white her teeth were. Her hair was chestnut, he could see, as she moved into a shaft of late afternoon sun slanting through the front window. Her flat-crowned hat, tipped far back on her head, was held by

a chin strap.

A fat man sitting on an upended barrel, looked at the girl with interest. "I'm surprise you talking about Dobe Gilson and Mileaway Jones."

The girl's cheeks whitened as if in anger or fear. Morgan couldn't tell which. "They're ruffians," she told the fat man, "no matter whose pay they draw."

"They're no worse than the man who hires them," the fat man said softly.

The girl whirled and flung down her list on the counter. "Make up the order, Mr. Pilson," she stormed. "Send it out. We want it tomorrow!"

As she stamped to the door, the fat man said, "Still going to marry Denver Kane, Ellie?"

Over her shoulder she cried, "Yes! But if I have my way you won't perform the ceremony, Reverend Quimby!"

When the girl had disappeared up the street, the fat Quimby said, "Too bad Ellie's brother ran off to Mexico. She could use a strong right arm about now."

Jake Pilson said from behind his plank counter, "Her brother, Ralph, was a damned dreamer. In this country you got to dream with a shooting iron under your pillow."

Morgan listened to the drift of their conversation. He learned that the girl's father had died a few months back and had left his ranch to her.

"Ranch is too much for the girl," Jake Pilson said. "Reckon that must be why Ellie's marrying Denver. Right, Reverend?"

The Reverend Quimby looked thoughtful. "She's marrying Denver because she's afraid not to."

Morgan had lifted the lid of a cracker barrel and helped himself. Then he purchased a tin of tomatoes. Using a small hand ax on the counter, Morgan hacked open the can and drained the juice. Munching a cracker, he said casually:

"Who's Dave Sanford?"

The Reverend Quimby unlaced fingers that had been clasped across his fat belly. His plump figure stiffened in a tight-fitting black suit that was green from age.

JAKE PILSON had taken Morgan's coin in payment for the tomatoes. Now he stared, his jaw slack. His voice cracked, as he said, "Maybe Jabrow was right, saying he was sending for a U.S. marshal. By grab, I believe he did send for one."

Morgan looked surprised.

The Reverend Quimby said to him, "If you're the marshal you've got your work cut out."

Pilson had been glancing out his front window where Mileaway and Dobe Gilson were still arguing in front of the saloon. "I'd be obliged," he told Morgan nervously, "if you'd clear out. I don't want my place shot up. If they figure you're a marshal there'll be trouble."

Morgan laughed. "Forget about me being a marshal."

The Reverend Quimby said quickly, "Why did you ask about Dave Sanford?"

Morgan shrugged. "Why not? All the way down the trail I've been seeing notices with his name signed to them. Saying he wanted to get in touch with the Masked Rider."

Pilson shook his head. "It was a trick. Sanford *is* the Masked Rider."

Morgan's brows lifted. The Reverend Quimby was watching him. The sky pilot said, "Sanford killed a rancher named Bill Hepple. Shot him in the back. Trial was yesterday. The sheriff came over and took him to the county seat. Sanford hangs tomorrow."

Morgan was sure both men could hear the slow hammerbeat of his heart.

The Reverend Quimby rose from the barrel where he had been sitting, his mouth tight. "I'm sorry I'm no judge of character. I always considered the Masked Rider to be a force against evil, no matter what others might think of him."

Pilson snorted. "If you ask me, any mysterious gent who wears a mask and goes riding around the country on a black horse ain't up to no good."

Morgan felt perspiration prickle out of his scalp. From the corner of his eye he studied Quimby. Although the man appeared older, Morgan guessed him to be

"Throw down your guns!" Morgan ordered. Sheffield answered, "Go to hell!"

about thirty, his own age.

It always warmed him to hear a man of Quimby's evident standing in a community defend the Masked Rider. But it was disheartening that events here in Alameda Valley had forced Quimby to change his mind.

Using two long brown fingers to fish a tomato from the can, Morgan inquired about the Bill Hepple who had been killed. Hepple, the storekeeper told him, had owned the Broken Arrow Ranch that adjoined Ellie Patterson's. Raiders had struck Hepple's horse herd. When he argued with a rifle, he was killed. Denver Kane and some of his riders had heard the shots. They had spurred up in time to see a gent in a mask and riding a black horse heading for the hills.

The tomatoes Morgan had been eating suddenly tasted sour. Dave Sanford was supposed to be the Masked Rider, yet he was the one who had put up those signs Morgan had seen. And Pilson was now claiming Sanford had done that to divert suspicion from himself. It didn't make sense.

When Morgan probed further Pilson told him that Sanford had arrived in the valley only a month back. "Claimed he was one of them newspaper reporters from back East. But he didn't fool me

none. I was on the jury. I voted to hang him."

Morgan's mouth felt dry. Suddenly he knew this was no small job he had undertaken here. He wished he had listened to Blue Hawk's plea and let the Yaqui accompany him. He could use Blue Hawk's cunning now.

The Reverend Quimby said, "Too bad you didn't get here sooner. You could have seen this Masked Rider yourself before the sheriff carted him off to the county seat."

Jake Pilson dumped Morgan's empty tomato tin into a trash barrel beside the counter. "I got a hunch Dave Sanford won't ever reach the county seat alive."

The Reverend Quimby said sternly, "To lynch a man is worse than murder."

WHEN Morgan learned the sheriff had not ridden with a posse when he had left town within the hour, he asked why the lawman had not taken simple precautions to guard the life of his prisoner.

"Nobody cares much who kills Sanford," Jake Pilson said drily. "Besides, Sheriff Brockton brags he ain't never lost a prisoner all the time he's been wearin' a badge. And that old coot is mule-headed enough to want to go alone."

The Reverend Quimby clenched his fists. "Maybe with the Masked Rider dead, folks won't be losing their best horseflesh."

Morgan was about to say that the Masked Rider never rustled a horse in his life. He clamped his lips shut just in time. Killing and rustling had been done before now in the name of the Masked Rider. Morgan vowed he would set things straight before he pulled out of this valley. But he might have a time doing it.

The front door opened and the two men he had seen in the doorway of the saloon entered the Mercantile.

Mileaway Jones, the man with the blunted nose, moved leisurely to the counter where Jake Pilson began to sweat.

Dobie Gilson, still chewing on his quill toothpick, stopped beside the cracker barrel. He lifted the lid, knocked it to the floor, and seized a fistful of crackers. These he nibbled, his eyes on Morgan all the while.

The two big men seemed to have plenty of time, Morgan observed. As if completely unconcerned with their presence, he purchased another tin of tomatoes from the shaking Pilson. As he reached for the hand ax to open the can, the Reverend Quimby whispered, "Get out while you can."

Morgan smiled. "Me run? Why? Something scary around here?" With exaggerated slowness, he turned and surveyed the room. Then, as if seeing Gilson and Jones for the first time, he grinned at the Reverend Quimby. "You mean I'm supposed to be scared of *them?*"

He threw back his head and laughed. And at the same moment that Dobie Gilson dropped his crackers back into the barrel and reached for a gun, Morgan moved.

He sent the tin of tomatoes flying overhand, the hard rim of the can catching Gilson squarely between the eyes. Gilson's knees buckled. He made a half-hearted attempt to brush aside the flow of blood from his cut forehead. The strength seemed suddenly to leave his legs. He staggered against the cracker barrel, upsetting it.

Without uttering a sound Gilson pitched forward into a snowfall of crackers.

CHAPTER III

The Promise

MILEAWAY JONES, a good three inches taller than his big partner who now lay unconscious on the floor, started for Morgan. He stepped in close, slamming a fist behind Morgan's right ear. Dazed from the blow, Morgan spun out of the big man's clutching fingers. Setting himself solidly on his boot heels, Wayne Morgan waited as Jones charged like a runaway box car.

The Reverend Quimby was urging Mor-

gan on. "Hit him, stranger!"

Morgan's vision, clouded by the smash of that heavy fist, had quickly cleared. But all he could see now was Mileaway Jones rushing down on him. Mileaway's face, and in the center of that face a flattened nose.

Morgan hit it. Mileaway Jones howled, put a hand to his face, and with the other hand pulled a gun. The weapon never fully cleared leather, because Morgan hit him a solid smash with his left. The gun clattered to the floor. In backing up, Mileaway tripped over Gilson's prostrate form. He lost his balance and went crashing out through the front door to land on his rump on the porch.

The loafers on the bench had been congregating around the windows when the fight started. Now they broke for the street, to stop short and stand in slack-jawed amazement as the tall, blue-eyed man they had seen ride into town a few moments before smashed Mileaway Jones in the face each time the big man tried to rise. Bleeding and battered, Mileaway had no chance with this tornado named Wayne Morgan.

Pawing blood from his eyes, he tried to rise again. Morgan caught him by the belt and pitched him over the porch rail where he fell into a welter of kicking horses at the hitchrack. Somebody pulled him away from the flashing hoofs of the spooked horses.

Quickly Morgan stepped off the porch, and as the crowd watched, searched Mileaway for weapons. Finding none, he stepped back.

Mileaway smeared blood across his face with a dirty shirt sleeve, then staggered across the street where he boarded a horse. Before he went loping out of town, he shook his fist at Morgan.

"I'll kill you for this!" he shouted.

Morgan started for the livery and his roan. But then he saw Ellie. Ellie Patterson was staring at a black-haired woman who had just pulled up at a rack in a red-wheeled buggy. The woman started to speak to Ellie, but the girl deliberately turned her back and walked away.

Puzzled by the girl's discourtesy, Morgan studied the woman in the buggy. A handsome woman in a dress that seemed like green metal, so tightly was it molded to her splendid figure. Her eyes had flashed in anger when Ellie turned her back. Now they were on Morgan, studying him intently.

Beside her on the buggy seat, a chunky Mexican, wearing a high-peaked sombrero with an eagle and snake embroidered on the crown, reached over and touched Morgan on the arm.

"Not in a long time have I seen such a battle," he said, grinning, and climbed from the buggy.

The man's fancy black suit bore a smudge of dust. Beneath the coat Morgan could see the heel plates of a silver-mounted gun. The fellow had a black mustache, the long, curving ends heavily waxed.

"You are one tough hombre," the man said, and clicked the heels of his Spanish boots. "I am General Descartes Cabrillo."

Morgan took the plump moist hand extended to him. He was trying to place the name. Then he had it. Cabrillo was graying at the temples. Forty-five, maybe. Younger, perhaps, but ten years before he had led an abortive revolution in Mexico. His followers had been shot or imprisoned. Cabrillo, half-Mexican, part French, part take-what-you-will, had fled to Honduras. Morgan was surprised that Cabrillo had nerve enough to show himself again even on the American side of the Border.

"If you wish to join me," Cabrillo said, fingering his mustachios, "you see Senora Rose Dewar." He waved a dark hand at the handsome woman in the buggy.

FOR a moment, as Morgan looked at Rose Dewar, he thought he saw a hint of hatred for this pompous, self-styled general in her dark eyes. But instantly it fled, and he was aware of her flashing white teeth as she smiled.

"I run the Mill Creek Way Station," she said. Her voice was husky, with a certain vibrant quality that stirred a man.

"Perhaps you would honor me with a visit?"

Instantly Cabrillo gave her a reproving glance, as if not liking her invitation to this stranger. Seeing his stern countenance, the woman lost her smile and sat on the buggy seat, remote and unmoving.

Morgan had removed his hat when she first spoke to him. Now he replaced it, hearing Dobie Gilson moaning from the Mercantile as he returned to consciousness.

To Rose Dewar he said, "Maybe we'll meet again." He turned to Cabrillo. "*Adios*, senor."

Swiftly Morgan moved to the livery. When he had boarded the roan and ridden out into an alley, he found the Reverend Quimby waiting for him.

When he asked the cleric about Rose Dewar and Cabrillo, Quimby's mouth tightened. "They are sweethearts. I cannot understand why she likes that fat pig." Quimby shrugged. "Women are a mystery."

When Morgan started to urge the roan forward, Quimby caught the mount by the bridle. "If Denver Kane figures to take Dave Sanford away from the sheriff, he'll likely do it at Rustler Pass," he said quickly. "The best place for an ambush."

Morgan said, "That would be news—if I was interested."

Still Quimby did not release the bridle. "Sheriff Brockton took the main road," he said pleadingly. "He figures to lay over tonight at Johnson's Ranch. By cutting through that way, you could catch up to him about sundown."

Morgan leaned forward, pried the fat fingers loose from the bridle bit. "*Adios*, Reverend," he said.

When speaking of the shortcut, Quimby had pointed toward a gash in the hills to the right of town. Slowly Morgan moved down the road. Where the trail branched away from the road, he halted a moment, staring back at the town. He saw the Reverend Quimby's plump figure beside the stable. The minister was still watching him.

Smiling grimly, Morgan moved to the left along the trail. Only when brushy hills screened him from the town did he touch spurs to the roan.

Back in town, with their purchases made at the Mercantile, Rose Dewar and General Cabrillo drove along the west road. She sat as far over in the buggy seat as she dared, for even the scent of his fancy cologne water sickened her.

Inwardly her heart cried out for another. A man long missing from this world of laughter and music and sun. A man, who for nearly ten years had counted the days and the months by scratching four lines on a stone wall and joining these lines with a fifth. Once he had smuggled out a letter, telling her of the marks and how each one would bring her nearer. Now the waiting was nearly over.

In her bosom the solid gold of a wedding ring seemed to burn her flesh. She could close her eyes against the blinding heat of the basin and see the inscription:

To Rose All my love Ralph

Cabrillo's voice jarred her, and he put a hand over her hand that held the reins. At the edge of town, five of the Mexican general's riders had moved in silently behind the buggy, leading his horse. A wicked crew, Mexicans and renegade gringos. She shivered, but forced a smile as the men followed the buggy.

The General was saying fervently, "I want you—"

"When do we go to Mexico, my General?" she asked.

"Soon, my dove," he murmured, and put his moist lips against the back of her hand.

Cringing, she turned her eyes to the south, where the mountains crowded the Mexican sky. She said, "You will do the thing you promised if I go with you?"

General Cabrillo's eyes sharpened against the curve of her full bosom. "Anything for you."

Her full red lips tightened at his careless answer. "But the real promise," she urged. "Tell me again."

PLAINLY nettled, General Descartes Cabrillo said, as if reciting from

memory, "Yes. I will free all political prisoners when I am in power. I will open the jails. Everyone will be free."

He saw her smile and draw a deep breath.

General Cabrillo tugged at his mustache. "Why this sympathy for prisoners? That I do not understand."

As if shocked, she turned wide black eyes on him. "Some of your own followers are imprisoned, Descartes. They have been so for ten long years. Don't you long to free even them?"

Descartes Cabrillo flicked a spot of dust from the lapel of his black coat. "Those foolish enough to be captured deserve their fate." Then, seeing the flush that spread upward from her bosom across her fine throat to her face, he hastily added, "But I will open the prison doors. That I promise."

"Good," she breathed.

Softly Cabrillo said, "How long am I to wait, my dove?"

She swallowed, but the smile remained on her lips. "In Mexico I am yours. For the promise you made."

"For the promise," he grunted, and rubbed his moist dark hands.

The buggy had swung past a mud-plastered shack at the foot of the mountain. Noticing an old Mexican in the yard, loading a burrow with firewood, Cabrillo told Rose to stop the buggy. His men pulled up behind them and sat their saddles in the hot sun.

"Paul Ramos!" Cabrillo got out and shouted, as his Spanish boots kicked through the yard dust.

At sight of the general the old Mexican drew himself up stiffly, dropping a stick of firewood. Under his breath he said, *"Cabrone!"*

The oath reached Cabrillo's ears. But the smile did not fade from his lips. "My old corporal," he said, speaking in Spanish. His black eyes glittered. "My *soldado!* I thought that perhaps again you would wear the uniform of the revolution." He shrugged, and spat on the ground. "But now you are ancient and you sleep with your goats and your burros."

The old Mexican said, "You betray my people again and you will die the ten thousand deaths of fire and sword."

General Descartes Cabrillo only grinned. Turning abruptly he crossed the yard to where his riders were bunched behind the buggy. A few whispered words and he climbed into the buggy and told Rose Deward to drive on.

A man's scream of pain caused her to look back. The riders had ringed the old Mexican in the yard. Their doubled saddled ropes lifted and fell. Lifted and fell.

Rose was suddenly aware of a coiling fear at the pit of her stomach.

General Cabrillo, lighting a cigar, said, "What is the matter, my dove? You are pale."

"It is the weather," she said. "The heat. Is it this hot in Mexico?"

When he smiled the ends of his mustachios curved against his damp cheeks. "Is is cool in the palace of *El Presidente* where we shall live. That is all that should worry you."

In her heart she wanted to cry out: "And how cool is it in the dungeon at Santo Tomas!" But instead, she smiled and touched his wrist with her cool fingers. And the general matched her smile and suddenly was very content to dream of his bright future with this woman. . . .

A NEW urgency rode with Wayne Morgan as the roan carried him deeper into the lonely hills. Since leaving Sahuaro the sun had crept slowly toward the west; twilight was at hand, and with its coming was a cooling breeze. Killing had been done in the name of the masked avenger. It was not the first time this had happened, nor would it be the last. A man named Bill Hepple had been shot to death, presumably by the Masked Rider. If Sanford was guilty of that killing and *had* posted those notices in the Sangres to take suspicion away from himself, then he should pay the penalty. But guilty or not, Morgan intended to have a talk with him and keep this Den-

ver Kane he had been told about from using the lynch rope on the helpless prisoner.

Emerging suddenly from the hills, Morgan slowed the roan at sight of two riders moving leisurely along the yellow ribbon of stage road that bisected a narrow valley, to climb and slash its way into the high mountains beyond.

Entering the road, Morgan moved up cautiously behind the riders who were a quarter of a mile ahead. When he was within fifty yards of them, one of the horsemen, a short and bony man in a plaid shirt, suddenly hipped around in his saddle and drew a rifle from a boot.

Making no move toward his guns, Morgan slowly closed the gap between them, wanting no sheriff who was too quick on the trigger to shoot him out of the saddle. Faint sunlight glinted on the badge pinned to the sheriff's suspenders. Astride a bony gray, the lawman waited with his prisoner.

A youngish, yellow-haired man sat his saddle beside the sheriff, hands manacled behind his back. A rope was cinched about his waist, the other end of it tied to the sheriff's saddle-horn.

"I want a word with you, Sheriff," Morgan called his eyes swinging to the prisoner.

CHAPTER IV

Boss of the Outlaws

DAVE SANFORD was not not more than twenty-five, Morgan judged. The dark eyes in his pale face were large and haunted, as if he had resigned himself to his fate. But although fear and apprehension obviously gripped him there was a defiant set to his jaws.

"Speak your piece," Sheriff Sam Brockton snapped to Morgan. "And no tricks." His pale eyes swept the surrounding hills as if uncertain as to whether this man was alone, or had riders hiding back in the brush.

Dave Sanford twisted uncomfortably in the saddle. Bitterly he stared at Morgan. "You're probably one of Denver Kane's men," he muttered. "He bragged I'd never reach the county seat."

As Morgan gave Sanford a brief study from the corners of his eyes he could not picture the young fellow as the type who would shoot a man in the back as the rancher, Bill Hepple, had been shot.

"I'm not drawing Denver Kane's wages," Wayne Morgan announced flatly.

"Then why you here?" Sheriff Brockton demanded irritably.

"To see justice done."

The lawman narrowed his eyes against the rider's sun-browned features, as if aware that this tall stranger on the roan was no saddle bum, as he had first supposed.

"Who are you?" Brockton demanded.

"Morgan—Wayne Morgan."

"That don't mean nothing to me," Sheriff Brockton growled, his eyes appraising Morgan's belt-guns. "Why for you interested in this here Dave Sanford?"

"If he's guilty, he should hang," Morgan said firmly, "but if he's innocent—"

"Of course I'm innocent!" Sanford cried. Color returned to his face as if the appearance of this rugged stranger had given him a faint though distant hope. "I didn't kill Bill Hepple!" he protested. "And I'm not the Masked Rider."

"The jury didn't believe you," Sheriff Brockton said with a trace of sarcasm in his voice.

Sanford was not a large man, weighing not more than a hundred and sixty pounds. In his wrinkled brown suit he looked almost like a dude; a dude who found his town attire of little comfort on the range. His white shirt, open at the throat, was stained with sweat.

Rolling a cigarette, Morgan was scanning the ridges, looking for any sign of hostile riders. Where the valley ended a mile ahead and the road climbed into the rugged foothills would be a likely place for an ambush, he decided. That V in the purple hills ahead could be the

Rustler Pass of which the Reverend Quimby had spoken, and had said Denver Kane would probably make his play there.

Sheriff Brockton's jaws set stubbornly. He lifted his rifle. "For a stranger you're all-fired interested in our troubles, hombre," he announced bluntly. "Head back the way you come in exactly one minute or I'll dust your brisket with a rifle slug."

The blunt order brought a tightening to Morgan's nerves. He had hoped to accomplish his purpose by peaceful means. But, with the sheriff holding a rifle on him, that now seemed improbable.

Suddenly from the corner of his eye he caught sight of a brief flash of sunlight on glass. Someone watching him through binoculars again! And from the V in the hills ahead. Denver Kane? It was possible.

Morgan tried persuasion on the grizzled and stubborn old sheriff. "Ride back to Sahuaro," he argued. "Put Sanford in jail there till you can get to the bottom of this Masked Rider business!"

SHERIFF BROCKTON shook his head stubbornly.

"There ain't hardly a sheriff anywhere that ain't itched to get his hands on the Masked Rider. If this here feller was anybody else I might give your proposition some thought. But the Masked Rider is different." He jerked a thumb at his prisoner. "He's due to hang tomorrow, and I aim to see he keeps the appointment."

Dave Sanford's face paled again. It was as if already he could feel the clutch of the noose at his throat.

Suddenly Sanford tugged at his manacles and cried: "You stupid fool! Listen to this stranger! He talks sense. Hang me, and you'll never learn who killed Bill Hepple or why!"

The sheriff frowned. "A jury found you guilty. That's good enough for me." Edging his horse around, he shoved his rifle muzzle against Morgan's ribs. "I told you once to ride! I ain't telling you again."

As if utterly dejected that his proposal had been vetoed by the sheriff, Morgan let his shoulders droop. He gave Dave Sanford a lean smile, murmuring, "Sorry, fellow. I did the best I could."

The look of utter helplessness on Sanford's face sickened him. He knew the man's nerves were about to snap, for this last thread of hope appeared to be gone.

"The hell with it!" Sanford said through his teeth, in a feeble attempt at indifference.

Turning his roan, Morgan retraced his tracks into the Sahuaro Hills as if he had given up and had decided to take the sheriff's advice and head back ta Sahuaro.

But once out of the sight of the sheriff and Sanford, he soon lost his apparent air of dejection. His jaws tightened as he spurred the roan deeper into the hills toward the spot he believed to be Rustler Pass.

"A stubborn old goat," he muttered under his breath, thinking of Sheriff Brockton, "And with more brains in his feet than he's got in his head. . . ."

At the crest of a brushy cliff overlooking the stage road, Denver Kane shifted his big feet and stared through a pair of binoculars at a distant rider. After a moment he handed the glasses to Luke Sheffield.

The Wagonwheel foreman adjusted the glasses to his eyes, studying a rider on a roan horse who had just left Sheriff Brockton and his prisoner and was now moving slowly back toward Sahuaro along the old trail.

When the rider was hidden by the hills, Sheffield lowered the glasses. "It's the same gent I told you I seen on the trail this afternoon." He rubbed the heavy scar on his right cheek with a forefinger. "Looks like he's heading back to town, so he won't give us no trouble."

Denver Kane's heavy features were dark with anger. "Thought you said Dobie and Mileaway was going to look that gent over in town."

Sheffield shrugged. "Now you'll only have Sanford to kill."

Kane said, "Sanford's the Masked Rider, or so everybody around here thinks. I want to keep him alive a while longer." He fingered his heavy jaw. "The sheriff—now he's something else again. Brockton is getting damned nosey. He's been asking me a lot of damnfool questions."

Sheffield seemed amused, as he touched his holster. He went in for fancy silk shirts and a lot of silver work on hatband and on that holster. Silently he laughed, and the movement of his lips made the livid scar on his right cheek seem to twist slowly, like a drowsy snake.

"The sheriff's been wondering how come you got Bill Hepple's Broken Arrow Ranch in your name so doggone quick?" he asked.

Denver Kane stared at four of his riders who were playing monte in the deepening shadows a few yards away. "You worry too much, Luke," he said bluntly. "About things that ain't none of your damned business."

WITH the smile still on his lips, Sheffield studied his boss. A big man, this Denver Kane. A lot of bluff, but also a lot of deadly purpose in a crafty brain. Eight years ago he had arrived in this valley, so the story went, with a patch on his pants and carrying a four-dollar saddle on his back.

Using his wits and a crooked lawyer named Sam Gates in the county seat, Kane had done all right. Sam Gates had a way with a pen. His copy of Bill Hepple's signature on a quit claim deed to the Broken Arrow was near perfect. Sheffield had seen it, so he knew. He reckoned that Bill Hepple's own mother wouldn't be able to tell it wasn't her son's signature.

Gradually the foreman lost his smile, remembering that two years he had been working for Kane without ever getting a cut of those fancy profits Kane had been promising him. Sheffield drew a hundred a month because he had been able to do what two previous ramrods had been unable to accomplish—keep the tough Wagonwheel crew in line. For Kane had other things to do besides worrying about his men.

None of the Wagonwheel crew wanted to argue with Sheffield's gun. At least nobody ever did a second time.

"Some of the boys are beginning to wonder," Sheffield drawled, "how come you don't tell me what's going on with them horses we got corraled back in the hills." He told Kane how the big rawboned Clint Guthrie had badgered him about it today on the Sangres trail.

Kane said, "You'll know—in time." Mention of Clint Guthrie set Kane's thoughts into a new channel.

Denver Kane weighed close to two hundred and thirty pounds. He was six feet three inches tall and bragged that blindfolded he could whip any man who walked.

Sheffield was persistent. "What's the deal with them horses?" When Kane did not reply, he said, "Or maybe it ain't horses—not altogether. There's a lot of good mines south of here. The Silver Queen, for instance. They took a lot of silver out before the vein petered out. Maybe you found it again."

Kane's laugh was unpleasant. "When would I have time to prowl the hills?"

"Bill Hepple's Broken Arrow spread ain't far from the Silver Queen. Is that why you wanted his ranch enough to kill him for it?"

Kane folded thick arms across his chest, trying not to let his foreman's persistence rile him. "When we're through with this horse deal, you'll have money enough to buy anything you want."

Sheffield rubbed his scarred cheek thoughtfully, the devil in his eyes. "The only thing I want you can't buy."

Kane narrowed his eyes. When Sheffield was in one of these moods he was as dangerous as a puma with a hind paw in a bear trap. Kane said, "You can buy anything if you got the price."

"Can you buy Ellie Patterson?"

Abruptly Kane stiffened, his teeth clenched so hard his jaw trembled. "You know better'n to talk that way about

Ellie," he said thinly.

Kane didn't love Ellie Patterson, not as he loved the dark-eyed woman he had married in Mexico. Even thinking of Luz made his heart pound. He meant to marry Ellie, all right, because that was necessary to his plans. But somehow he would bring Luz across the Border. A man with two wives. Luz might not like that. In fact, she might put a knife in his heart. Luz had a temper. She had cat eyes. Kane found himself trying to justify his anger.

"Speak soft when you talk about Ellie," he said to Sheffield.

But his foreman still had that damned taunting grin. Many times Kane had had the urge to smash that sneering face with a bullet. But, as he had those other times, he was forced to be practical. He wasn't afraid of Luke. That much he was sure of. But the man was so ungodly fast with a gun! If they went at it likely both would die.

Sheffield said, "You aim to marry Ellie so you can get her Hub spread."

KANE made an ugly sound in his throat and Sheffield knew he had guessed the truth. When Ellie's father, Captain Patterson, had been alive, Sheffield had tried to court the girl. The Captain had objected, violently. Now as Sheffield stared up at Kane he wondered how Ellie could stomach the Wagonwheel boss.

In that moment Denver Kane made a decision. At the first opportunity he would kill Luke Sheffield. He stared through the thickening shadows to where Clint Guthrie was playing monte with the other three Wagonwheel riders as they waited for Sheriff Brockton and his prisoner to appear on the road below.

There was a natural enmity between Sheffield and Clint Guthrie. They hated each other. An instinctive hatred, Kane guessed it was. Now he studied Guthrie, a big raw-boned man hunkered over a deck of cards. Perhaps in another few hours Guthrie would be drawing Sheffield's hundred a month as foreman. There were some who said Guthrie was so fast

BLUE HAWK

with a gun that Sheffield was afraid of him.

One of the men yelled, "Sheriff coming!"

As Kane turned to his horse, he said to Sheffield, "Don't worry about your cut of the profits. You'll get everything I owe you. With interest."

Satisfied that he had made a wise decision in choosing Guthrie as Sheffield's successor, Kane moved down to the road to await the sheriff's appearance.

All along Kane had been worried about Dave Sanford. At the county seat Sanford might have been able to get the ear of someone with influence. Sanford claimed to be a newspaperman and this breed, Denver had heard, commanded a certain respect. Therefore, when Sanford had been voted guilty by the jury, Kane had never intended for the prisoner to reach the county seat. Keep him around for a while, let this Masked Rider business stay alive until it was no longer needed.

CHAPTER V

The Rescue

FROM a screen of leaves at the crest of a brushy hill, Wayne Morgan saw six riders break from the shadows of Rustler Pass and surround the sheriff and his prisoner. Dusk had fallen, but he saw Sheriff Brockton try to swing up his rifle, saw one of the riders come in behind and put a gun at his back. Another knocked the sheriff's rifle to the road. Morgan could hear their voices, hear what was being said.

"Damn you, Kane!" Brockton shouted, shaking his fist at a beefy man astride a chestnut.

The man he called Kane made some reply that Morgan could not hear.

At Kane's side was a thin dark man wearing a flat-crowned black hat. From the way Kane kept talking to him, Morgan figured him to be the Wagonwheel foreman.

"I'll jail you for this!" Brockton was shouting.

Evidently enjoying the sheriff's impotent rage, Kane said, "Maybe you won't get a chance to jail anybody."

"Are you threatening me?"

Kane chewed on an unlighted cigar. "We want your prisoner."

Clint Guthrie whipped out a knife and cut the end of rope that was cinched around Sanford's middle and tied to the sheriff's saddle-horn. The rope end dropped to the dust, but no one made a move to remove the manacles from the prisoner's wrists.

Sheriff Brockton yelled, "You take Sanford over my dead body!"

"Then that's the way it'll be," Denver Kane said around his cigar.

Wayne Morgan was moving his roan slowly downwind toward the riders grouped in the shadows. Lifting his two belt-guns when he reached the edge of the road, he cocked them. Both muzzles he lined on a spot between Denver Kane's shoulder blades.

The sound of the cocking guns reached Kane. He turned his head and saw the horseman in the brush. He froze.

Morgan said coldly, "You or your men make a move, Kane, and you'll be the one to die."

At the first indication that someone had sneaked up behind them, Luke Sheffield had started a hand toward his belt. But something in Morgan's cold voice stayed his hand before it could touch a gun-butt. He glanced at Kane, but the Wagonwheel boss sat rigid in the saddle.

"Throw down your guns!" Morgan ordered.

Sheffield said over his shoulder, "Go to hell!"

Morgan moved the roan in close, ramming the guns against Kane's back. "Tell 'em, Kane!" he snapped.

For just an instant Kane hesitated. Across the road his men were grouped around the sheriff and the prisoner. His eyes scanned the slopes. Did this gutty stranger have friends hiding in the brush?

As muzzles pressed harder against his back, he shivered slightly.

"Throw down your guns, boys," he said. "We'll settle with this hombre later on."

The men cursed and argued but finally tossed their guns into the brush. Kane, watching from beneath slitted lids, saw that Guthrie had made no move toward his shirt where he carried a hideout gun. Kane smiled. That Guthrie was going to be all right. Making a great show, Guthrie tossed his belt-gun into a ditch beside the road.

Luke Sheffield's lips curled as he stared at Kane. "We could've made a fight of it."

Stung by his foreman's implication that he was yellow, Kane growled. "It ain't your back he's got the guns on."

Morgan moved into the road.

Sheffield laughed harshly. "Hell, he's alone;! The tough Wagonwheel crew gets took by one man."

"Shut up!" Kane roared, thoroughly angered now that he saw the stranger was truly alone.

Sheriff Brockton gave Morgan a look of pure admiration. "That was the nerviest thing I seen pulled in many a day." Then grudgingly he added, "Looks like I should've taken your advice. But I never figured Kane had guts enough for a deal like this."

KANE, studying Morgan, turned to Luke Sheffield.

"This is the gent we saw through the glasses. I thought you said he was heading back to town."

Sheffield's laughter was a taunting note in the silence of the shadowy canyon. "Looks like we sure as hell màde a mistake about that, Boss."

If Kane had never hated his foreman before, he hated him now. Badgering him in front of the crew! He watched Clint Guthrie slowly move his horse away from the sheriff, to where the shadows lay deep and purple. Kane smiled grimly.

Wanting to stall to give Guthrie a chance to get his hideout gun, Kane said to Morgan, "Sanford's the Masked Rider. We're goin' to see he gets hanged proper. Put up your gun and join us, stranger."

Wayne Morgan said, "Have you got proof that he's the Masked Rider?"

For answer Kane gingerly unbuckled the strap of a saddle-bag while Morgan watched him closely. "Come out with a gun in your hand," Morgan warned, "and you'll be dead before you hit the ground."

"Think I'm a fool?" Kane demanded. Quickly he drew a mask and black hat from his saddle-bags and held them up so Morgan could see them. "The Masked Rider's outfit," Kane said triumphantly. "I found it in Sanford's room at the hotel. This is what he was wearing when he did his night-riding."

Knowing he might never have another chance to hear Kane's side of this grim business, Morgan tried to draw him out. "What kind of night-riding did Sanford do?"

"Horse rustling. All of us horse ranchers been losing ten, fifteen head at a crack. This Masked Rider and his gang have been doing it. We couldn't get a line on him till he tried to get Bill Hepple's stock. Hepple fought and died for his trouble. But me and the boys was close by—"

"You're a damned liar!" It was Dave Sanford's angry voice, cutting across the road.

Jerking his head at the mask and hat Kane clutched in his thick fingers, Morgan said, "The Masked Rider never wore those."

Silence fell over the group. Kane leaned forward as if to give this strange rider a closer scrutiny. Even Sheriff Brockton peered through the shadows with new interest.

Kane stuffed the mask and crumpled hat back into his saddle-bag. "How come you know so much about the Masked Rider?" he asked thinly.

Morgan said quickly, "I ran into the Masked Rider once." He jerked his head at the prisoner, adding, "He's a bigger man than Sanford. And besides—"

From the corner of his eye, Morgan had seen a movement across the road. A big raw-boned rider was moving a hand with blinding speed toward the front of his shirt. Clint Guthrie's fingers had ripped open the shirt buttons, touched the butt of a revolver. Guthrie's revolver spat a streak of orange but instead of slanting at Morgan, it was pointed toward the dusty road.

An instant before Guthrie's gun cleared, Morgan's guns roared their lethal challenge. Caught squarely in the center of the chest by the heavy caliber slugs, Clint Guthrie was knocked off his horse.

As Guthrie pitched into the dust, his riderless horse rammed into two Wagonwheel mounts. One of the riders was unseated. Scrambling to his knees the man made a frantic grab for a stirrup. But the frightened horse plunged straight toward him and the yellow dust turned red where an iron-shod hoof caught the rider between the eyes.

IN THE confusion Sanford's horse spooked and whirled away into the shadows, bearing the manacled and helpless Dave, the rope trailing from his waist. Morgan knew that if that dragging rope fouled on a bush or rock, Sanford would be jerked from the saddle and, unable to break his fall with his manacled hands, might have his neck broken.

As he started in swift pursuit he heard a spatter of gunfire behind him. Some of Kane's men had evidently found their weapons. He fervently hoped Sheriff Brockton would have sense enough to hole up instead of stubbornly trying to shoot it out with Kane and his men.

He finally managed to bring Sanford's horse to a halt.

"I owe you plenty," Sanford panted.

Morgan cocked his head at the sound of rapidly diminishing hoofbeats on the road. He hoped that meant Kane and his men had lit out.

In the faint shine of starlight he saw how Sanford was sweating. Sanford stepped through his manacled hands so that they were now in front of him and he could use the reins and a gun Morgan gave him.

"Let's go back for the sheriff," Morgan said.

Together they rode into the full darkness. Dismounting in the canyon, Morgan stepped over the bodies of two dead men crumpled in the center of the road. Hearing a moan from a brushy slope in front of him, Morgan moved that way.

It was the sheriff. He had been shot twice, once in the leg and once high on the right shoulder. He was unconscious. Carrying the grizzled sheriff to the road, Morgan pulled him up into the roan's saddle.

"Any place we can take him besides town?" he asked Sanford.

Sanford gestured toward the dark south rim of the Sangres. "Ellie Patterson's Hub isn't more than five miles."

"Then that's where we're heading."

Holding the unconscious sheriff across his saddle, he set the roan to a gallop.

At the gate of the Hub Ranch, Morgan suggested that Sanford stay behind in the shadows. There was no telling what his reception would be. He was, after all, an escaped prisoner.

As Morgan moved closed he could see shadowy ranch buildings, a barn with a sagging roof, a broken fence. The Hub, it seemed, was going to seed. He thought of Ellie. More than one woman, he reflected, had married a man she didn't love in order to save a ranch.

When he crossed the ranchyard, a cracked old voice cried from the darkness, "Sing out your brand or head for the hills!"

"I've got the sheriff! He's wounded."

A light appeared suddenly in the ranchhouse, and the back door opened. In the wash of light Morgan could see Ellie Patterson's slender form.

"What is it, Jody?" she called.

"Sheriff's hurt," Jody, the old man, replied, and stepped into view, a little bowlegged fellow carrying a rifle. "Better stay back, Ellie," he advised when the girl started across the yard. "Could be a trap. Might be that Denver—"

Ellie's voice was furious. "I've told you never to talk that way about Denver."

Gathering up her skirts, she ran to Morgan's side. He had dismounted and was carrying the sheriff to the bunkhouse.

JODY lighted a lamp. The last hand on the payroll, Jody Tinker was foreman and general handyman. When the Hub had encompassed half of Alameda Valley he had been the Captain's ramrod. Now Captain Patterson was dead and the Hub would be a pig sty once Denver Kane moved in with his bride.

As Morgan laid the sheriff on a bunk Ellie's lips firmed. She recognized him as the stranger who had whipped Dobie Gilson and Mileaway Jones.

After Morgan had helped bandage the sheriff's wounds, she demanded to know how Brockton had come to be shot.

For a long moment Morgan weighed his reply. Then he said, "It was Denver Kane or some of his men."

As the girl's full-bodied figure stiffened, Jody Tinker swore. "I told you, Ellie, that Kane was no damned good."

In the glow of the lamp Ellie Patterson's face turned pale. Angrily she stepped outside. Morgan followed her into the darkness, intending to question her. But at that moment a shadow moved beside the corral. Morgan started to draw his guns, than saw it was Sanford who stepped into the shaft of light from the door.

At sight of him Ellie Patterson stood rigid. Then crying, "Dave, Dave!" she rushed toward him.

CHAPTER VI

Blue Hawk Takes a Hand

BEFORE Ellie's shadow blended with Sanford's she suddenly halted, her slender body stiffening. For a moment she seemed to be fighting for breath, then almost coldly she said, "I'm glad they didn't hang you."

Abruptly she turned toward the house. At the doorway she paused, biting her lips as if fighting back tears. She nodded toward the south.

"Mexico is over there," she told Sanford. "If I were you I'd be across those mountains by morning."

Stepping into the house, she closed the door and blew out the lamp.

Tinker made coffee in the bunkhouse. A stove-up old rider, he constantly chattered about the old days when he and the Captain had ruled this range before the coming of Denver Kane.

Finally Morgan got him on the subject of the murdered rancher, Bill Hepple, and the Masked Rider. "Never did figure you killed Hepple," the old foreman told Sanford. "A lot of other folks figure like me."

But Dave Sanford seemed not to hear. He was staring moodily at the unswept bunkhouse floor, holding a tin cup of coffee in his hand.

"I can't understand why she wants to marry a man like Denver Kane," he said dismally.

"Neither can anybody else," Jody Tinker said. Looking at Morgan he added, "Sometimes I'd rather see that girl in her grave than hitched to a no-good skunk like Kane."

Hungry and weary, Morgan wolfed the food Tinker prepared on the battered old wood stove, savoring the beans and bacon and cold biscuits. Tomorrow he would solve the puzzle of this valley. But tonight he needed rest. He found a bunk and a blanket and in five minutes was sound asleep . . .

Although it was not yet the time of the full moon when he was to meet Wayne Morgan, Blue Hawk grew restless at the Yaqui camp where he had gone to visit his own people. The camp was breaking up, for word had drifted with the wind that howled through the canyons of the Sangres that white men's guns would soon speak with their bitter tongue. It was no place for a redman, no matter how peaceful he might be.

Bidding Astwin, his distant cousin farewell, the young Yaqui partner of Wayne

Morgan shouldered his bow and, mounting his gray, moved along a rocky trail.

As he rode he listened to the wind and the other sounds that meant so much to his trained senses.

In the twilight that filtered through the aspens, Blue Hawk's superb figure seemed molded from solid copper. His was a high-browed, intelligent face, his black eyes widely spaced. Sleek hair, black as a winter's midnight, was worn long and held by a crimson bandeau. In white cotton shirt and breeches, with a crimson scarf about his waist, he was a colorful figure blending with the shadows.

At his belt he wore a sheath knife. He carried a revolver and rifle, for he was skilled with all weapons. But he favored the primitive bow he wore on his back. For years now he had been Wayne Morgan's companion of the trails, and only he shared the secret that Morgan was in reality the legendary Masked Rider whose exploits were recounted over branding fires and around winter stoves, or wherever men gathered to talk of beef of horses or of politics. Then the talk inevitably would turn to the Masked Rider.

Abruptly Blue Hawk pulled up the gray. Tacked to the bole of a pine was another of those notices Morgan had tried to laugh off, a notice signed by a man named Dave Sanford who wanted to find the Masked Rider.

Blue Hawk frowned. From the first he had sensed Morgan did not want to deprive him of an opportunity to visit his people, so had ridden off to solve this mystery alone. As Blue Hawk swung the gray back into the trail he felt a tingle along his nerves.

AN HOUR later when he had climbed a rocky shelf and threaded his way through a stand of pines, he heard the clatter of shod hoofs on rock. Quickly he drew deeper into the trees where the shadows were thick. Leaning forward, he clamped the gray's nostrils so he could not whinny a greeting to the other horses.

Blue Hawk's trained senses told him there were eight or nine horses, some of them loose. Now through the trees he could see them moving higher into the mountains, herded by a big, black-haired man in a checkered shirt, and a squat puncher in faded denims.

"Here's another batch we can chalk up to the Masked Rider," the black-haired man was telling his companion with a laugh, waving a hand at the loose horses.

"Not this bunch!" the squat man yelled back above the clacking sound of the hoofs. "By this time the Masked Rider will have a rope around his neck."

"By grab!" the black-haired fellow exclaimed. "I didn't figure it was that time yet. And it'll be Denver Kane's rope that swings him."

"I'd like to be there and see it," the

squat man said.

Alarmed, Blue Hawk sat rigid in the saddle. Above the hoarse laughter of these men he could hear the hammer of his heart. The Masked Rider hanged? No, it was not possible. But the Indian was aware that his palms were moist.

Frozen, Blue Hawk seemed incapable of movement and didn't see the blaze-faced gelding that swerved from the herd and came cantering through the trees to halt and nibble at a clump of grass nearby.

The squat rider swore and came spurring, swinging his saddle rope. Not a dozen yards away, the rider suddenly dropped his rope and yelled: "Injuns!"

And Blue Hawk realized that he had been seen.

The man was firing almost as soon as the word left his lips. Jumping the gray sideward, Blue Hawk heard the *whoosh* of the bullet from the heavy gun. His fear for Morgan's safety turned to sudden hatred for these men. They had laughed as they talked of the Masked Rider dying by the rope.

As the gray moved with blinding speed, Blue Hawk was reaching behind him. The bow was in his dark slender hand as the squat man lifted his gun for another shot. Swiftly Blue Hawk fitted an arrow to the bowstring, sent it twanging into the shadows. Suddenly the squat man toppled from the saddle of his frightened horse. He fell on his side, his hands clutching the feathered shaft that protruded from his chest. Then his hands fell away and his legs stiffened.

The black-haired rider was spurring up, yelling, "Charlie, Charlie!" In a geyser of pine needles he pulled up his mount, crying, "What the hell!" as he saw the dead man on the ground.

Then, seeing a dark figure through the trees holding a bow, he fired, wheeled his mount and sent the animal plunging up the canyon. As he swerved, an arrow buried itself in a pine trunk exactly where he had been but an instant before.

"Gawdalmighty!" he yelled. "Yaquis!"

Stoically Blue Hawk sat his saddle, listening to the fading sounds of the panic-stricken rider. Then he replaced the bow and turned his gray down the trail that led into the valley. . . .

THE next morning Wayne Morgan felt rested. Over eggs and bacon and fried potatoes he listened to Sanford explain that he was a newspaper reporter. Raised on a Texas ranch he had gone to New York to work on a paper. But unable to get the West from his mind, he had longed to return and see if it held more for him than the newspaper business. He had finally persuaded his editor to give him an assignment to travel over the West and do feature articles and profiles of famous Western characters.

[*Turn page*]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF. AND NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE.

It costs no more to get the best!

"One of the most important characters I wanted to interview," Dave Sanford said, "was the Masked Rider. When I heard he was operating in this Sangre de Dios country I headed this way."

"Operating?" Morgan inquired tensely, lighting a cigarette.

"The horse rustling that's been going on. At Binford, the county seat, I heard all about the Masked Rider. I had those notices printed and came to Sahuaro. I rode around the country and put them up myself, hoping to lure him out of his hide-out for an interview."

Morgan said, "What makes you think the Masked Rider would talk to you?"

"These bad men are all the same. They like to brag about their exploits and see their names in print."

Morgan pursed his lips thoughtfully. It was a novelty to hear this newspaperman's idea of the Masked Rider. Morgan decided he liked the young man.

Sanford said, "Now I'm more certain than ever that I want to stay out West." Morosely he added, "I even had the girl picked out."

"Ellie?"

Dave Sanford swore softly. "If only I'd let the Masked Rider alone and never come to Sahuaro! Then I'd never have been involved in Hepple's killing—but I'd never have met Ellie."

Knowing how Sanford must feel about the girl, Morgan changed the subject. The Hub bunkhouse was large and from the size of it, Morgan knew the outfit used to carry over a dozen riders. He asked Jody Tinker about it.

Tinker's weathered old face tightened. "When the Captain was alive there was plenty of action around the Hub. But the cattle market got shot all to hell. Then the Captain went for horse raising like Jabrow and some of the other valley ranchers." Tinker's eyes glittered as he stared hard at Morgan. "Ellie lost a hundred head week before last. I'd give a year's pay to find out if Denver Kane had a hand in that."

Morgan said, "Did you get a line on the rustlers?"

"Trailed 'em to the badlands," Jody Tinker said, as he cleared the table of breakfast dishes. "Lost the tracks in the Sangres."

"Maybe you and me ought to have a talk with Kane," Morgan drawled.

"Won't do no good," Tinker snapped. "It's the Masked Rider that's doing the dirty work. He takes Kane's orders. Find him and we'll find Ellie's horses."

Morgan squirmed in his chair. "Looks as if the Masked Rider is getting blamed for everything that happens around here."

"I'd hang him myself if I could catch him," Tinker growled. "Them horses was practically the last stock Ellie had."

Dave Sanford regarded the old foreman a moment, running a nervous hand over his yellow hair. Suddenly his eyes brightened. "How about the Silver Queen? It's on Hub property. Couldn't that mine mean something to Ellie?"

Tinker snorted. "You'll grow old listening to them stories that somebody will find silver there again."

"What makes you so sure?" Morgan cut in.

"Before the Capain died," Tinker explained, "he brung a mining engineer all the way down from Virginia City. I was there when the feller turned in his report. No silver. And no chance of finding any."

Morgan rose from the table. "Do me a favor, Tinker."

The old man regarded him sharply. "What kind of a favor?"

"Let Sanford hide out here at the Hub. You know what'll happen if Kane gets his hands on him."

Tinker rubbed his grizzled jaw. "I'd oughta see Miss Ellie. She's the boss."

IT WAS Ellie Patterson herself, just entering the bunkhouse, who settled the matter. Having overheard the conversation, she said, without looking at Sanford, "If he's fool enough to pass up Mexico, then let him stay here."

While the girl was not as reserved as she had been last night, she still was not too friendly. She was holding herself in

while Sanford was around, Morgan guessed. Tinker poured a cup of coffee for her, and as she sipped the steaming brew, Morgan noted the shadows under her brown eyes, the tension at the corners of her mouth.

He said, "Losing all those horses was a real blow, ma'am."

Ellie bit her lips, then said soberly, "I loathe violence, but when they find this Masked Rider, I hope they hang him!"

Dave Sanford stiffened. Noting this, Ellie turned, concern touching her eyes briefly. "I never thought you were the Masked Rider," she told him quickly. For a space their eyes held, while a flush stole into Ellie's cheeks. Then abruptly she stepped from the bunkhouse.

Sanford followed her into the yard. "I want to talk to you, Ellie."

Over her shoulder she said coldly, "We have nothing to discuss."

Then, quickening her pace, she ran to the big house and slammed the door behind her.

CHAPTER VII

Bad Luck Pursues

WAYNE MORGAN found the yellow-haired young newspaperman staring soberly at the closed door. When Morgan turned to the corral to saddle his roan, Sanford came up, his eyes dark and brooding.

He watched Morgan tighten the cinch, saying, "I ought to be riding with you."

Morgan shook his head. "I'll get to the bottom of this Masked Rider business. And I'll do it—alone."

Sanford watched him swing lightly into saddle. "I hope you find the Masked Rider," he sad grimly. "Because I'm worried about Ellie."

Morgan narrowed his blue eyes. "That girl can take care of herself."

"Maybe. But I've got a hunch she may be next on the Masked Rider's list to kill. You remember what happened to Bill Hepple."

Morgan swore. He had taken these references to the Masked Rider with an outward indifference. Many times he had heard the Masked Rider called a killer and a thief. But to learn that someone thought it possible for him to kill a woman was too much.

"Why would the Masked Rider take a gun to Ellie?" he demanded.

"The Silver Queen is on her land."

"You heard Tinker say there is no ore."

"Maybe," Sanford admitted. "But a lot of folks, including myself, believe Kane has found that lost vein and wants to get control of the mine."

Morgan sighed. "It's possible for Kane to have ideas like that, I suppose. But not the Masked Rider."

"What makes you so sure?" Sanford asked sharply.

"Just a hunch. I've got a feeling he's honest."

Morgan neck-reined the roan. He had looked in on Sheriff Brockton. The old lawman was conscious, but all the fight was gone out of him. He had been sleeping peacefully when Morgan left the bunkhouse, Sanford said, "What happens to me if the sheriff tries to arrest me again? He's stubborn enough to try it."

"By the time that happens," Morgan said soberly, "I hope we'll have Bill Hepple's killer and be at the bottom of this Masked Rider business."

Dave Sanford said grimly, "I've wanted to interview the Masked Rider. I hope I get a chance—when he's standing on the scaffold with a noose around his neck."

Morgan felt a chill touch his spine. As he sent the roan at a high lope across the dusty yard, he fervently hoped the newspaperman's words were not prophetic. . . .

With the death of Clint Guthrie, Kane had been forced to make a quick change in plans. In his ranchhouse at the edge of the Sangres, Kane angrily paced the parlor floor, cursing the mystery stranger whose bullets had knocked the life

from Guthrie. The floor seemed to tremble from the weight of Kane's heavy body.

Who was this Wayne Morgan, the boss of the Wagonwheel asked himself. A deputy U.S. Marshal? Sheffield had seen him coming down from the northern slopes of the Sangres along the old outlaw trail. That *could* mean that Morgan was on the dodge. But if that were the case, why had he taken up with Dave Sanford and the sheriff?

Still smarting from the stigma of having himself and his tough crew corraled by a lone gunman, Denver Kane spent a solid minute silently cursing Morgan.

Last night in the darkness and confusion Kane had ordered his men out of the canyon where they had jumped the sheriff and his prisoner. There had been no sense in risking his own life, Kane had reasoned, or the lives of any more of his crew. Morgan had killed one of his men, had inadvertently been responsible for the death of another rider who had his brains kicked out by the hoofs of his own mount.

DURING the brief skirmish Kane had seen Sheriff Brockton go down. Right now he hoped the sheriff was good and dead.

Methodically Denver Kane reviewed his position. With his mind made up as to what his next move would be, he was about to cross the wide porch of the house when he heard a commotion in the yard. Drawn by the sound of angry voices, he pushed his way through a knot of riders beside the corral fence.

"What the hell's the trouble now?" Kane demanded, glowering at one of his crew, black-haired Lon Dover. Dover's plaid shirt was damp with sweat and his eyes looked as if he'd had Satan himself at his back with a pitchfork.

Dover seemed incapable of speech at the moment. It was Luke Sheffield, holding one of his silver bridles, who told Kane what had made Dover ride down from the Sangres camp this early in the morning.

"He's either drunk or crazy," Sheffield said, his eyes remote and cold on the perspiring rider. "Claims Yaquis jumped him and Jake. Killed Jake."

Denver Kane clenched the front of Dover's shirt with a heavy hand, twisting the shirt up around the man's neck. Dover's face began to purple. He fought those clawing fingers at his shirt front. He was not a small man, but he might as well have been fighting off a grizzly, barehanded, as to push Kane around.

"What kind of a crew have I got?" Kane demanded of the ring of silent men. "Send two riders to pick up a few head of horses, and one of 'em gets killed. Last night my boys get jumped by this Wayne Morgan hombre. What we need is pink lemonade instead of whisky."

Angrily he shoved Dover against the corral fence so hard that one of the poles was jarred loose. Dover's slate-gray eyes flashed, but he made no move toward the gun at his belt.

Kane said through his teeth, "Now tell me what really happened. And made it good or I'll cut out your tongue and feed it to the pigs."

Dover's cheeks whitened. He scraped a nervous thumb along the stubble of black beard on his jaws. Hesitantly he told how he and Jake Winters had picked up the few head of rustled horses at a secret holding corral at the foot of the Sangres. He recounted how a tall, blue-eyed jasper on a roan horse had appeared suddenly when they were moving the herd along a draw.

"We got rid of him, pronto," Lon Dover said, as if hoping this would make up for his later failure.

Instead of being even mildly pleased, Kane roared, "Sounds like Morgan! Why in hell didn't you kill him?"

Dover's face was frozen as Kane lifted a big fist as if to smash the puncher with his knuckles. Then Kane seemed to get a grip on himself. "Go ahead," he growled. "Tell the rest."

"We was halfway up the Sangres," Dover said, watching Kane's clenched fists, "when these damned Yaquis jumped

us. Must've been twenty of 'em. Poor Jake never had a chance. He was shot outa the saddle." Dover swallowed as if in memory. "He's still laying up there with an arrow in his gut. Go take a look if you don't believe me."

Kane said, "What'd you do with the horses?"

"Injuns got 'em, I guess. I didn't wait to see."

Kane gave the rider a black scowl. Things were going badly all of a sudden. That damned Wayne Morgan! Jerking his head at Sheffield, he told the foreman to saddle up. In a few minutes the two of them were moving north from the sprawling Wagonwheel.

"How come we're going alone?" Sheffield inquired, his eyes intent on Kane's heavy face.

Seeing the foreman's narrow scarred face turned his way, Kane forced himself to apologize for his harsh words last night. "Lost my temper," he ended. "Guess I get kind of crazy when I think somebody is insulting Ellie."

Sheffield made no reply, but his eyes were mocking when he said, "Too bad about Guthrie."

KANE gave him a sharp glance, and held his breath. Had Sheffield guessed his thoughts, Kane wondered?

As they left the ranch road and took a trail that climbed through scrub brush, Sheffield drawled, "I went back and had a look at Guthrie last night. After he was killed I got to thinking that with this horse business and all I been so busy I didn't look him over too careful when he hired on."

His eyes watched Kane's face. His lips were smiling thinly. Sheffield had taken a metal object from his pocket and now he flipped it up in the air, as a man might flip a silver dollar and catch it.

Sheffield said, "He was wearing this pinned to his undershirt."

The metal object now lay flat in the palm of Sheffield's hand. Kane could see that it was gold, and that raised letters proclaimed: "United States Marshal."

The cords in Kane's thick neck stood out as he studied the badge. Then, with an oath, he snatched it from Sheffield's hand and hurled it into the brush.

Kane was sweating. That had been close, too damned close. No wonder Guthrie had been trying to play up to him.

Sheffield drawled, "Fella sure has to know who he can trust." He was absently rubbing the scar on his cheek, grinning.

Kane forced himself to say, "You been worrying about a cut of the profits. You'll get twenty-five per cent of every mount we sell."

Sheffield seemed not too impressed and Kane frowned. They entered a rocky canyon where dwarfed pines high on the granite walls looked like tufts of green moss.

"Horses are no good if you can't sell 'em," Sheffield said.

"I got a buyer."

"Who?"

Kane had an urge to fling out his arm and knock Sheffield backward out of the saddle, then crush him with a boot heel like he'd crush a snake. But Sheffield had him hogtied. He needed the foreman more than he had ever needed him before. He had to have somebody with a fast gun to keep men like Wayne Morgan from climbing his back.

Seeing the foreman rubbing the scar on his cheek stirred a vague suspicion in Kane. He had never learned where or how Sheffield had acquired that gash on his face. Last spring Sheffield had delivered some horses to a buyer in Tucson. But the foreman had not returned with the crew. When he had come home later it had been with a wound on his face which was now a scar.

They had climbed to a shelf of rock where the valley stretched hot and flat beneath them, to wash like a solid wave against the distant southern slopes of the Sangres.

Kane said then, "You never did tell me where you got that scar."

It wasn't the first time he had asked the foreman, nor had Sheffield's answer

changed. "A man don't get a scar on his face without somebody paying for it," Sheffield said thinly, and touched the crooked line across his right cheek. "I'll collect for this one."

AN HOUR later they crossed the stage road that angled in from the south, a good five miles above Rustler Pass where they had tried to jump the sheriff and his prisoner. Without speaking they followed the road higher into the mountains until they could see the noon stage from Sahuaro pulled up in front of Rose Dewar's way station.

The two riders sat their saddles, smoking, until passengers had boarded the coach and the driver had sent his team lunging into their collars.

As they moved on then toward the way station, Sheffield seemed suddenly to find a reason for suspicion, and did not let Kane get behind him. Although he hated the man, Kane had to admit grudgingly that a man would have to get up damned early to catch Sheffield with his suspenders dragging.

When Kane and Sheffield rode up to the way station five horsemen who were resting in the sparse shade of a poplar eyed them narrowly.

"Cabrillo's men," Kane said.

"Who in hell is Cabrillo?" Sheffield demanded, and loosened his gun.

"You'll find out."

Kane returned the stares of the men—Border scum, Americanos and Mexicans, the type who would sell their own sisters for a hatful of *centavos*.

CHAPTER VIII

Shady Deal

ROSE DEWAR was sitting on Cabrillo's lap when Kane entered the log station. There was something about the black-haired woman that reminded Kane of Luz. But Luz was still young. This Dewar woman, although still beautiful in a cold and remote way, would be getting on. Probably a few strands of silver showing up in her hair she would pluck out before a mirror.

The way she casually rose from the general's lap and smoothed her skirts sent the blood pounding through Kane. It had been six months since he had crossed the Border to see his wife. Luz would have to wait a while longer.

Rose Dewar adjusted a comb in her black hair and said, "You'll want the small room." She turned to a short bar, picked up a bottle and some glasses, and led the way down a narrow corridor.

The room was small, as Rose had said, furnished only with a large green-topped table and four chairs. She put the bottle and glasses on the table and quietly left the room, her skirts making a soft rustling sound in the hallway.

Cabrillo, seeing Sheffield staring after the woman's proud figure, narrowed his black eyes and closed the door to cut off the foreman's view.

Cabrillo jerked his head at Sheffield. "Foreman, eh?" he said.

"Yeah," Kane said, and settled his bulk into one of the chairs.

He poured a drink. He needed one, by God. Too much was happening to suit him. Learning that Guthrie had been the marshal whom Rancher Jabrow had threatened to send for made Kane's throat tighten. He'd have to take it out of the big horse rancher's hide. Jabrow's neighbors, like Steele and Reed, would eventually knuckle under. But Jabrow was of a different breed. On top of that, there was Lon Dover yelling about Yaquis. Hell, everybody knew there hadn't been Yaquis in these mountains for a decade. Even this comforting thought was of little solace to Kane.

It was enough to make a man's guts crawl to think of an arrow whipping at you from the shadows.

Cabrillo, in his black suit, his Spanish boots shining like polished ebony, was pouring himself a drink. "Why you no bring this hombre before?"

Cabrillo was talking to Kane but looking at Luke Sheffield who had leaned

against the wall, his eyes small and dangerous-looking.

Kane knew Sheffield well enough to know that the scar-faced foreman had taken an instant dislike to Cabrillo, and wouldn't mind letting the general know it.

Kane said, "I wanted to be sure our deal was set before I brought him."

Cabrillo fingered the waxed ends of the mustache that curved on his upper lip like a bull's horns.

Kane had another drink. He had gambled a lot on the valley and its people. Once before he had done business with General Cabrillo. For a time it had been profitable, then he had been forced to flee for his life. This time Cabrillo would afford the means of making Kane the supreme power in this valley.

Cabrillo, forgetting Sheffield for the moment, said, "You have the horses?"

Kane nodded. "Three hundred or so."

"When can I have them?" Cabrillo spoke softly, his voice only slightly accented.

Kane was rubbing the tips of his fingers together. "When do I get the gold?"

General Cabrillo smiled, showing gleaming white teeth. Beneath his black mustachios those teeth reminded Kane of a row of tombstones set across the mouth of a red-roofed cavern.

TAKING a heavy pouch from his coat pocket, Cabrillo loosened the draw strings. Upended, the pouch spilled a cascade of gold coins across the table top.

Kane noticed that Sheffield's eyes were narrow and bright on the pile of gold. Sunlight, filtering through a high window made the coins seem almost alive.

"A down payment," Cabrillo said, watching Kane's heavy face.

Kane's wits sharpened. You needed your head to deal with Cabrillo. "All the gold," Kane said easily, settling back in the chair. "Then you get the horses."

For a moment Cabrillo seemed offended, then he smiled again. "My men have the gold. All of it." He shrugged. You are a hard man to deal with as always."

Kane smiled. He had won a point and perhaps it was an omen that his luck was changing for the better. He rubbed his hands together as if already feeling the touch of the gold Cabrillo would give him. Only a means to an end, this horse rustling, for it was intended to drive the big ranchers to the wall, men like Jabrow and Steele and Rand.

Already they were in a bad way. The cavalry had suddenly stopped buying their horses. Army regulations, so it was said. The Army buyers seemed suddenly to favor Wyoming horses. Although the ranchers cursed the Army, the buyers were helpless. Even they did not know that Kane was behind it, that he had a powerful friend in the War Department, a politician he had once saved from a hang-noose.

Kane had lied to save the man and now the debt was being repaid. Leaving nothing to chance, Kane had bought up notes the ranchers had with the bank at Binford. It was luck that he had been able to get hold of Bill Hepple's Broken Arrow so easily. Hepple had objected to having his horse herd raided and had died for his objections. Knowing Hepple had no relatives, Kane had used his blackleg lawyer to forge the papers. With the Broken Arrow in his hip pocket, Kane now had eyes on the Hub.

One of the first things Kane intended to do when he got Cabrillo's payment for the horses was to buy himself a sheriff. And it wouldn't be Old Man Brockton, either. Brockton would quietly turn in his badge or he would turn up his toes in Boot Hill. It didn't make much difference to Kane which he did.

Cabrillo said, "Tomorrow we bring the gold. But I need your men to help move the horses."

Kane agreed, and scooped the gold coins back into the pouch. Seeing Sheffield's bright eyes on him he gave the foreman some of the coins. "Buy yourself a drink," he told Sheffield.

With no thanks in his eyes, Sheffield pocketed the coins. "What now?"

"Meet me at the saloon in town in three hours. I want you to ride out to the Hub

with me."

Sheffield's eyes thinned. "Marrying Ellie today?" he asked, his lips barely moving.

"Tomorrow," Kane said.

Sheffield touched the scar on his cheek. "Remind me to wish you luck," he said. Leaving the room, he closed the door behind him.

When he had gone Cabrillo said darkly, "That hombre I do not like."

"He won't be around long," Kane said, and poured two drinks from the bottle on the table.

They drank to their success, a despot's rule in the valley for Kane, a triumphant march on Mexico for the general.

Kane said, feeling the weight of gold in his pocket, "You got money quick."

Cabrillo showed his teeth in a smile. "I have men. In Mexico there are ore trains. Add them up. What do you have?" He chuckled. "*Dinero* for the general."

KANE poured another drink for himself. A slight sound at the inside wall of the room caused him to look up. Twice before he had heard a rustle behind the wall. His eyes narrowed as he carefully looked the wall over. Nothing suspicious, unless you could find some cause for alarm in dark green wall paper.

Cabrillo, noting Kane's narrowed eyes, said, "What you see?"

"Not what I see, but what I hear," Kane said heavily. Then he shrugged. "Mice, probably."

"Always you hear things," Cabrillo said. He laughed. "Like last time you sell me horses. Ten years ago. You hear the *rurales* coming. Good thing then you have the long ears. No?"

Kane downed his drink. Cabrillo speaking of the old days had reminded him of something. "The last time you stirred up a revolution you had an adjutant. An American named Ralph Patterson."

Cabrillo sucked in his thick lips, his eyes suddenly cold and black. "*Si,* very well I remember that *malo hombre.*" He made an ugly sound deep in his throat. "Senor Patterson was the traitor. He had the weak stomach. When I ride to a village and shoot down those who do not join me, his heart becomes the heart of a chicken. Soon he calls me a butcher. I plan to have him shot, but before this can happen he betrays me. Enemies surround my camp. Had it not been for this Senor Patterson I would have been *El Presidente!*"

The general's stocky figure trembled with rage. He gave Kane an evil grin. "But I have the revenge. When I get to Honduras I send money back to a friend who is an official at the prison of Santo Tomas. For years I send the money so that this Senor Patterson will die the thousand deaths. My friend makes sure of that."

Kane had not expected this tirade from the general, and for a moment he considered the advisability of speaking of his own interest in Ellie Patterson's long-missing brother.

Finally reaching a decision, he asked, "Is Patterson still alive?"

Cabrillo's eyes sharpened on the heavy face. "Why you want to know?"

"I'm marrying his sister. I've told her I know where her brother is. I got hold of a letter he smuggled out of Santo Tomas. It was addressed to her, but I stole it. I showed her enough to let her know I had learned where he was and could get him free if she'd marry me. She agreed."

Cabrillo's lips curled. "Too bad your little plan will not work. Senor Patterson is dead. My friend at Santo Tomas wrote me that they buried him last month."

Kane said easily, "My plan will still work. The girl doesn't know her brother's dead. When and if she does find out—" Kane spread his hands, a faint smile on his lips.

In the pantry of her way station Rose Dewar seemed frozen against the wall. Her dark eyes were bright with shock. In the past it had been to her advantage to overhear conversations in the small room she reserved for special guests.

Now, upon hearing Cabrillo's fateful words, she stood rigid, sweat beading her forehead and running unnoticed across

her face. Even though it was stifling in the small enclosure her heart was cold. Cold and dead in her breast.

Mechanically she lifted a six-inch section of the pantry wall and fitted it tight against the wall paper of the room where Cabrillo and Kane were talking. She had heard enough. She had cut out that square of wood herself, never thinking she would hear words that would turn the fluids of her body to ice.

Then, gradually her grief gave way to a deep and burning anger. She had come to this part of the territory in the first place because she had learned that Ralph's father and sister lived here. She hadn't known much about Ralph when they had been married by Father Josef at San Luis that moonlit night ten years ago.

IN THREE months Ralph had been a prisoner, sentenced to face a firing squad. She had put on her best black dress and her silver earrings and put an ebony comb in her hair and visited Colonel Gomez, the officer whose troops had routed Cabrillo and captured Ralph. For her tears and her beauty the colonel used his influence in Ralph's behalf.

Too late, Rose learned she had gained but little with her tearful smiles. Ralph Patterson was not to die. He was to spend the rest of his life in a Mexican prison. She was not allowed to see her husband, the colonel explained, because he was dangerous, and an enemy of Mexico. He must be punished as an example to other *Americanos* who might be tempted to follow another Cabrillo.

Three years ago she had learned Ralph was in Santo Tomas. She had ridden to the Hub Ranch on a spent horse. Captain Patterson knew who she was. Ralph had written of this Rose Dewar. The Captain blamed her for luring Ralph to Mexico. A hard-bitten man, the Captain had stalked into the house and returned with a blacksnake whip, threatening to use it if Rose ever again came to the Hub. A white-faced Ellie, who had witnessed the scene, had been forbidden to ever speak to her.

From the pantry Rose heard Kane bidding Cabrillo good-by. Hastily she moved to her own quarters, opened a trunk, and removed a small revolver. This she put into a pocket of her dress. She waited until Kane was gone, then stepped to the small room where Cabrillo was pouring himself a drink.

CHAPTER IX

Riled Ranchers

QUIETLY Cabrillo put down the bottle, his eyes on the gun Rose had taken from her pocket. She saw the fear in his eyes and it warmed her heart.

"What is this?" he said thinly.

"You thought I would go to Mexico with you because I loved you," she said, her lips curling.

He licked sweat from his mustache, cast a nervous glance through the window to where his men lounged by the poplar.

Quietly she told him about Ralph. "I knew if you became dictator of Mexico you could free him for a price. The price was me."

General Descartes Cabrillo trembled in the knees. Many times he had watched others die. It was, in a way, fascinating to watch a man—or a woman—die. But he could find no fascination in the prospect that soon his own brains might be splattered over the green wall paper.

"You heard us talking," he said, and when she nodded her dark head, he added, "I lied, my dove. This man you say is your husband. He is not dead. He lives!"

His thick brown hands flung the table before she could fire. The stocky figure had moved with startling quickness, lifting the heavy table, hurling it. An edge of the table smashed against her right arm, the impact knocking her to the floor. Dazed with pain, she tried to reach for the gun. The movement brought a stricken cry for her lips. She stared at the

gun which had fallen to the floor. Then her eyes moved nearer her body. Shocked, she stared at the wedge of white bone that protruded from her arm. A dark stain widened on the sleeve of her dress.

"Kill me, damn you!" she sobbed. "Get it over with!"

But suddenly General Cabrillo was forced to put the tempting thought from his mind, for with a rattle and bang the southbound stage swung into the yard. For a moment he had considered. He had five men out there. But there was a driver and guard on the stage. Also three male passengers just alighting. A nasty mess if a gunshot brought them charging inside.

Slowly he holstered the silver-mounted gun he had taken from beneath his coat.

"This Ellie Patterson," he said through his teeth, "is your sister-in-law?"

"She's going to marry Denver Kane!" Rose Dewer cried. "He's scum like you, but he'll kill you if you touch her."

Cabrillo's smile was cold. "He marries her for the ranch. Nothing else." His eyes narrowed in his pale, handsome face. "You ever tell what you hear Senor Kane and me say in this room today and I will take this Ellie Patterson with my troops. She will follow my camps and soon she will be old and I will watch her beg me to shoot her. And you will know that you are to blame because you talked. This I swear to do on the memory of my dead mother!"

Knowing Cabrillo would make good his terrible threat, nevertheless Rose Dewar could not restrain her anger.

"You never had a mother! You are the son of a pig!"

Cabrillo drew back his foot to kick her in the face, but at that moment the front door banged open and a man's voice yelled:

"Rose, get the grub on! We're empty clear to our socks."

To the woman holding her shattered arm, Cabrillo said, "The promise. Remember the promise."

Quickly he left by the rear door, signaled his men, and rode into the mountains. Rose heard him go. She tried to get her legs under her. She didn't make it. She fainted dead away. . . .

ALL morning Wayne Morgan had been prowling the vicinity of Sahuaro, trying to get some line on the horses that had been rustled, for he was sure that was the key to the trouble here in the valley. At noon he returned to Sahuaro in time to see Ellie Patterson bring Sheriff Brockton to a small cottage at the edge of town. Doc Lindstrom's house, Morgan learned later.

To Morgan, watching from a distance, the girl seemed unusually disturbed. Without lingering in town she immediately drove the wagon back in the direction of the Hub, sitting upright on the wagon seat, shoulders squared, sunlight catching the russet in her hair.

Jody Tinker, who had accompanied the girl on her trip to town, rode his horse to the Ajax Saloon, and, dismounting, went inside.

Hearing his name called, Morgan looked over his shoulder to see the plump Reverend Quimby sitting on a box in front of a big tent, mopping his brow. The perspiring sky pilot seemed unusually glum before the tent where he held Sunday services. At Morgan's question, he shrugged.

"Your guess is as good as mine about why Ellie is dead set on marrying Kane."

Morgan thoughtfully rolled a cigarette, staring at the faint smudge of dust in the distance kicked up by Ellie's team and wagon.

"Kane's forcing her to marry him," Morgan said. "I'll bet on that."

"Probably," Quimby admitted. "But the girl won't talk. I've tried to question her." Quimby made a gesture of despair with his plump hands. "I almost wish the Masked Rider hadn't turned out to be the way he has. I always figured that if things got out of hand here I'd somehow get word to him. I had a lot of faith in that fella. I'm sorry it's been destroyed."

Lighting his cigarette, Morgan said casually, "Don't be too sure you've judged

the Masked Rider correctly."

Quimby gave him a sharp glance. Then he shook his head sadly. "Nobody can help now. Kane sent word he wants me to marry him and Ellie—first thing in the morning."

"You're not going to do it, are you?"

Qimby stared down at his dusty boots. "The Wagonwheel rider that brought me the message showed me a gun. He said it would be putting holes in my back if I didn't do like I was told." Quimby stared at Morgan as if to find some sanction in the stern face for his decision. "If I don't marry them," the sky pilot said, waving a hand at the tent, "all my work here will be ended. And Kane will only take Ellie to the county seat and get a judge to marry them anyhow."

Trying to infer that Quimby might yet avoid the problem that faced him, Morgan moved down street to the Ajax.

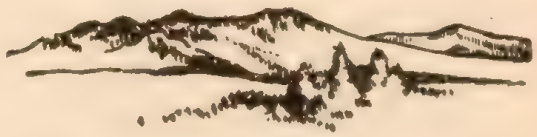
Jody Tinker was not at the bar. Only a bartender was present, and one customer at a back table. Even though the customer's hat brim was pulled low, Morgan recognized him as Kane's scar-faced foreman, Luke Sheffield. The Wagonwheel ramrod was drinking out of a bottle. When Morgan entered, he did not even look up.

As Morgan moved toward a pool table at the rear of the place, he heard Sheffield swearing to himself. Morgan racked up the balls, shot a game. Somehow he sensed that if he stayed here long enough Sheffield would lead him to something. Once he thought he heard the foreman mutter Ellie Patterson's name. He was drunk, and the bartender watched him narrowly as if aware of his ugly mood.

Morgan glanced up, at the sound of hoofbeats in the street. Half a dozen heavily armed riders were moving past, the Ajax Saloon. He had been expecting more of Kane's men but these were strangers. In a moment they were gone.

NOT MORE than five minutes later Jody Tinker came charging through the swing doors. Spotting Morgan, the gray-haired Hub foreman hurriedly beck-

RIDING the RANGE



There's a job to be done on the range
That the city has never known,
And to some it seems a lonely life,
Just your pony and you alone.

But watch the posts and the wire roll on
Till they're lost in a far, blue haze
And you see mirages of far-off lands
Through the quiet, sunshiny days.

When the city lights and the weary nights
Have turned you away from your goal
Then the peaceful calm is a healing balm
To a heartsick, lonely soul.

Yes, a man can lose his troubles there
As the quiet days go by,
For they'll fade away in the clear, blue air
And you'll find you're a different guy.

—Cecile Bonham

oned him out the rear door to the alley.

"Lucky for you Quimby seen you come into the Ajax and I had time to warn you!" Tinker panted.

"Warn me from what?"

"Jabrow and Steele and Whitey Rand just rode in with some of their boys. Biggest horse ranchers in the valley. They're over at the Mercantile asking Jake Pilson questions—about you!"

Morgan felt a tremor along his nerves. He didn't want trouble with these ranchers.

"What do they want with me?" he asked, glancing along the alley to where it ended against a brick building.

"The boys're het to the collars," Tinker exclaimed, "and they're carrying extra rope. They've been chasing rustler sign and watched it fade out until they're plumb loco. They're going broke losing so many horses. And they figure any stranger around here should do some talking and quick. Somehow they found out about you being here—" Tinker's voice broke off. "Oh, my Gawd!"

Hearing the hoof sounds of a hard-ridden horse, Morgan turned quickly. Luke Sheffield was spurring across the flats in the general direction of the Hub. He rode loosely in the saddle, carrying a bottle in one hand. Concern touched Morgan, remembering how the foreman had been muttering Ellie Patterson's name between drinks in the Ajax.

But it was not Sheffield who had brought the exclamation from Tinker. His fingers were clutching Morgan's shirt as the tall waddy spun around.

A big red-bearded man had swung around a corner of the saloon and was hurrying into the alley. With him was a short, hard-bodied man with pale eyes and brows.

"Jabrow and Whitey Rand!" Tinker breathed.

The two men pulled up short at sight of Tinker and the stranger.

"Your name Morgan?" Jabrow snapped in a heavy voice.

Knowing there was no use to lie, Morgan admitted his identity.

Whitey Rand said, "I knew we'd find him if we looked the town over!" and moved a hand to his belt gun.

But he never got a chance to complete his draw, for Morgan's guns were suddenly out of leather. "I don't want trouble with you boys," Morgan said evenly. "But I haven't time to answer fool questions."

"You'll talk!" Jabrow thundered. "And plenty! With a rope around your neck!"

When Whitey Rand opened his mouth as if to yell to the rest of his friends who were prowling the town, Morgan cocked his guns. The lethal gesture closed Rand's mouth.

Although he knew that under ordinary circumstances these ranchers would be rational men, Morgan had no wish to try and convince them now of his peaceful intentions.

"Turn around!" he ordered.

Cursing, the two ranchers obeyed. Over his shoulder, Jabrow said, "We'll see you again, Morgan. And damned soon." And when Jody Tinker stepped behind them, drew their guns and threw the weapons over a fence, Jabrow added, "We'll be lookin' you up, too, Jody!"

Moving swiftly, Morgan and the Hub ramrod found their horses. Before they cleared town a rifle opened up behind them, but the range was too long.

A mile from town Morgan saw riders in swift pursuit. Jabrow and his crowd were after them. But Jody Tinker's knowledge of this range enabled them to swing through twisting arroyos, down brushy draws until they reached the foothills. After an hour, when they pulled up to let their horses breathe, Morgan saw that the dust cloud was a good four miles behind them and heading north.

SUDDENLY Morgan remembered Luke Sheffield and how the man had looked when he had ridden off toward the Hub. Quickly heading south with Tinker, Morgan told him of his dark suspicions.

Tinker's face was grave. "He always was sweet on Ellie. You don't suppose—"

Already Tinker had told Morgan how the Captain had taken his old cavalry saber to Sheffield when he had caught the Hub foreman trying to kiss Ellie one spring night a few months back. The excitement of that scene was what had caused the Captain's heart to give out. In two days he had been dead.

"Sheffield always swore he'd get even." Tinker said. "Too bad the Captain didn't run that saber through his black heart."

Morgan, pushing the roan to a gallop, soon outdistanced Tinker. The old man shouted for him to wait, but Morgan had one grim purpose. To stop Sheffield if he really had ridden to make Ellie pay for the scar her father had put on his face.

CHAPTER X

Gun and Saber

AFTER leaving Rose Dewar's place, Luke Sheffield had been aware of a new restlessness. It was seeing the Dewar woman that started it. And neither the gold Kane had given him nor the whiskey he had consumed in the Ajax had brought him any comfort.

This valley had treated him shabbily. He had wanted Ellie Patterson since the first time he had danced with her at a schoolhouse party. Thinking he had seen an invitation in her eyes, he had decided to find out for sure when he had trailed some of Kane's horses to Tucson last spring. He had left the rest of the crew and headed for the Hub. Kane was sweet on Ellie, but the boss could go to hell if this brown-haired girl smiled on Sheffield.

She had come to the porch, and in the darkness he had kissed her. Her protests had only roused him further. Half out of his mind he had heard an old man's snarl behind him and, turning had caught the downsweep of a cavalry saber that had ripped open the side of his face.

Ellie had pleaded with the Captain not to kill him.

Now when the Wagonwheel foreman reached the Hub, he drained the last of his whisky and threw away the bottle. Jody Tinker's claybank was not in the corral. Sheffield smiled thinly and, dismounting, stumbled up the porch steps and into the house.

Ellie sat at a small desk, dressed in shirt and levis, her brown hair in two braids down her back. At the sound of his entry she rose, nearly stumbling over a wicker suitcase on the floor beside the desk.

At sight of Luke Sheffield her face went dead white. And, as if reading his mind, she suddenly tried to seize a rifle leaning against the wall.

Sheffield was swifter. He caught her by the wrists. Rigid, she stared up into his bloodshot eyes. "Get out of here before Denver finds you!"

Grinning, he nodded at the suitcase. "All packed up? Good. You and me are leaving town. I got some money and—"

She tried to free herself but his fingers were like iron claws. Still smiling, he kicked the rifle across the room where it clattered against the big stone fireplace.

Ellie said, "Denver is coming soon. He'll kill you when I tell him!"

Luke Sheffield seemed deaf to her threats. "You and me are getting married. Then I'll tend to Denver. I been wanting to do that for a long time."

She kicked at him and, snarling, he drew her tight against him. Holding her with one hand he reached for the cavalry saber that was resting on pegs over the bedroom door.

At sight of the cold steel, the girl shivered. "You woldn't dare!" she breathed.

"The Captain used this on me," he whispered, his mouth close to her cheek. "Marry me or I'll fix your face so's you'll never marry anybody."

"Please go!" Ellie had tried threats. Now she tried to plead. She was scared white at the madness in his eyes.

"I ain't never slept without dreaming of you," Sheffield said hoarsely, "since that night on the porch."

Ellie stood frozen as Sheffield touched her cheek with the point of the saber.

A door opened behind them and a man's voice said, "Ellie, are you in here?"

Knocking Ellie aside with a sweep of his arm, Sheffield leaped backward to the wall and drew his gun.

Gradually his eyes focused on a rigid figure in the doorway.

"Dave Sanford!" he breathed, recognizing the newspaperman in his wrinkled brown suit.

Ellie was crying, "Run, Dave! Run! He'll kill you!"

AS SHE cried out she flung herself on Sheffield, seizing his gun arm, trying to turn the weapon away from Sanford. In the scuffle the gun was discharged. The bullet smashed the front window.

Saber in one hand, gun in the other, Shieffield brushed Ellie out of the way with an elbow and advanced on Sanford. The newspaperman had spotted the fallen rifle. Unarmed, he had no chance unless he could reach that weapon. He sprang for it, but Sheffield lunged with the saber and the tip cut the buttons from the front of Sanford's shirt.

"Stay and take it!" Sheffield yelled, the scar on his cheek quivering in his rage. "Because if you run, I'll shoot your legs out from under you. You and Ellie been here alone all the time, damn you! I'll kill you for it!"

Unable to reach the rifle, Dave Sanford clenched his fists, ready to fight barehanded against a saber and a gun for his life and Ellie's. . . .

A mile from the Hub Wayne Morgan heard the flat bark of a gun. Leaning far over the saddle-horn, he got the last ounce of speed from the roan and came whipping across the ranchyard. Above the pound of the roan's hoofs he heard Ellie's scream from the house.

Flinging himself from saddle he pounded up the porch steps, drawn guns in his hands.

A gun shot slammed from the parlor, the bullet tearing a gout of splinters from the door frame.

Ducking against the front of the house, Morgan moved toward a shattered window where he hoped to be able to spot Sheffield. For of course it was the Wagonwheel foreman who was firing. His horse was groundhitched in the yard.

From inside the house, Ellie cried, "Watch him, Morgan!"

Risking a glance through the broken window into the parlor, Morgan saw Ellie beside an overturned table. Dave Sanford lay huddled on the floor. Ellie was hugging him to her bosom, oblivious of the blood that stained the front of her shirt.

"Sheffield went out the back door!" Ellie screamed, seeing Morgan's face at the window.

A muscle quivered in Morgan's back. Wheeling, he was just in time to see the Wagonwheel foreman coming up behind him. Sheffield's gun crashed and the rest of the window was blown to pieces. Dropping to his knees on the porch, Morgan watched Sheffield advance from a corner of the house, walking purposefully toward the porch. He was grinning crookedly. His hat was gone, a lock of dark hair was curled tight against his damp forehead.

"Goddam you, Morgan!" he shouted, and fired again.

Throwing himself flat on the porch, Morgan felt the breath of the bullet across the back of his neck. Desperately he wanted to get off the porch so as not to endanger the lives of Ellie and Sanford with flying lead. But Sheffield wasn't going to give him a chance.

In that moment he thought of what Ellie must have suffered at Sheffield's hand, in fright if in nothing else.

Instinctively he triggered his guns, seeing a great cloud of dust rise in the yard where he had last seen Sheffield. Getting to his feet, Morgan waited. A vagrant breeze cleared the dust raised by the foreman's shuffling boots. Sheffield was staggering across the yard like a drunk, his feet dragging, his head bent as if to see the blood that stained the front of his fancy silk shirt.

Then, whipping the gun from under his left arm, he fired again. At the same instant Wayne Morgan dropped the ham-

mers of his Colts. Sheffield's scream was high-pitched above the roar of the guns.

BY THE TIME Morgan reached the man he was dead, his black hair yellowed from the yard dust.

Turning, Morgan saw Ellie on the porch, her face drawn and white. "Help me with Dave," she pleaded.

In the house, Morgan bathed the blood from Sanford's forehead, listening to Ellie's frantic story of how Sheffield had knocked Sanford unconscious with the flat of the saber blade.

Ellie's lips trembled. "We've got to hide Dave," she whispered hoarsely. "Denver will be here any minute. He should have been here before this."

"Kane coming here?" Morgan said, his brows lifting.

Ellie stared down at her clenched hands, nodding at the suitcase beside the desk. "I'm going to town with him—to be married."

Intending to talk the girl out of her mad plan to marry the Wagonwheel boss, Morgan carried Sanford to a cellar beneath the house. Sanford's eyes opened as Morgan laid him out on the dirt floor.

"Kane's due," Morgan whispered. "Stay here and keep your mouth shut. No matter what happens."

Angrily Sanford declared he was no baby, but when he tried to rise, he passed out again.

Leaving him, Morgan entered the house by the back door. The moment he reached the parlor and saw Ellie standing rigid beside the fireplace, he knew something was wrong. Before he could lift a gun, Denver Kane stepped into view from the bedroom, holding a sawed-off shotgun against Ellie's back.

"I owe you something, Morgan, for killing Sheffield. But you won't like the payment." The big Wagonwheel boss' face turned ugly. "Drop your guns or I'll kill this girl!"

Drawn by the shooting, Kane had moved up afoot. Now Morgan could see two of his men leading three horses across the yard. That meant two more of Kane's men were out there somewhere.

In a moment he knew who they were when he saw Dobie Gilson and Mileaway Jones. The two big punchers, still bearing the marks of their encounter with Morgan at the Mercantile, glared.

Morgan, turning back to Kane, nodded at the shotgun muzzles touching Ellie's rigid back. "You'd shoot the girl you figure to marry?"

Kane's eyes glittered. "I thought the only way I could get the Hub was by marrying her. But you've fixed it for me. I'm going to say you ran off with Ellie. That'll give folks in this valley a lot to chew over for a few months." He laughed unpleasantly. "I've got Hepple's Broken Arrow, and as soon as a few details are worked out, I'll take over the Hub. Besides, I've already got a wife."

"You killed Hepple," Morgan accused.

"Sure."

Straining his ears, Morgan hoped to hear the sound of Jody Tinker spurring toward Sahuaro. The old Hub foreman had been outdistanced by Morgan's roan, but when he got close to the ranch he should have been able to spot trouble and ride for help.

"You're taking over the Hub because of the Silver Queen," Morgan said, trying to stall to give Jody time.

Kane laughed. "You think so much of the Silver Queen, I'm going to let you and Ellie look it over. And take your time doing it."

Outside, there was a sudden harsh cry, a gunshot. Jody Tinker's voice, cursing.

Another shot. Through the shattered window Morgan saw that Tinker had come sneaking up to the house on foot. Now one of Kane's men, black-haired Lon Dover, had shot the old foreman.

"Jody!" Ellie screamed, but when she started to run to his aid, Kane seized her by a wrist.

Willing to risk his own life to save the foolhardy old man in the yard, Morgan started to draw his guns. Something smashed against the back of his head. As he was falling, he saw Jody Tinker trying to rise from the dusty yard, staggering

drunkenly. Tinker managed to take two steps before Dover shot him again. Tinker dropped and lay still. That was the last Morgan remembered. . . .

IT WAS an earth-shattering roar that partially cleared the fog of unconsciousness from Morgan's mind. Opening his eyes, he was aware of a pain at the back of his head. He seemed to be in total darkness. When he breathed, his lungs burned from dust-laden air. Looking up he saw Ellie Patterson's face above him, the pale oval barely visible in the gloom.

Morgan shook his head, clearing it of the last vestige of the gray smoke that had seemed to envelop his consciousness.

"We're trapped in the Silver Queen!" Ellie cried, her voice filled with terror. "Kane dynamited the entrance. There's no other way out. I know—"

Her voice broke. Taking her by the hand, Morgan led the girl deeper into the tunnel. At first his knees were weak from the treacherous blow either Gilson or Jones had delivered to the back of his head. Now his strength returned, but with it came the realization that unless a miracle happened, they would die of thirst and hunger.

That was in the not too distant future. While they could still breathe there was hope.

"There's got to be another way out," he tried to reassure the trembling girl.

When he bitterly thought of Blue Hawk at the Yaqui encampment he could almost smell the clean mountain air of the Sangres.

CHAPTER XI

Trapped in the Silver Queen

THEY must have traveled a mile through the tunnel, Wayne Morgan and Ellie, stumbling over rotted shoring, bumping against boulders big as wagons that had dropped from the tunnel roof. It was stifling. When Morgan paused to wipe his face, he saw that Ellie was carrying her suitcase. He told her to leave it, to conserve her strength.

Now that his eyes were accustomed to the gloom of the cavern he saw the bitter smile on Ellie's lips. "What a fool I was to think I could trust Kane!" Quickly she told him of her brother.

"You thought a lot of him?"

"I hardly remember him. But I remember my father sitting on the porch, in the evenings, staring off toward Mexico. When Ralph left it broke Dad's heart. And he never forgave Rose Dewar for marrying him."

Morgan looked surprised.

"I didn't know all the details till Kane told me when he brought me here," Ellie went on, and a sob escaped her lips. "He said Ralph is dead."

Suddenly she hurled the suitcase against the tunnel wall. It flew opening, spilling her wedding clothes over the stone floor. There was the tinkling sound of broken glass.

"My mirror," Ellie cried, laughing hysterically. "Seven years bad luck." Tears glistened in her eyes. "Will we ever live that long, Morgan?"

Deeper in the tunnel Morgan suddenly caught the sweet smell of fresh air. Leaving the girl, he hurried forward, to see a natural fissure in the rocky ceiling that let in a thin finger of sunlight.

Spurred by a faint hope, Morgan seized fallen timbers, stacking them high enough for him to reach the ceiling. Digging his fingers into the fissure, he drew himself up into a natural opening. Hanging by one hand, he slipped his arm through the break in the ceiling. His hand felt warm in the sun.

His heart seemed to stop beating then. For a huge boulder closed off the rest of the opening. Bracing himself atop the timbers, he tried to arch his back against the rock. The boulder failed to move.

The black truth struck him like a club. They had fresh air to breathe now, but no water or food. They could yell themself hoarse and there was only one chance in ten million that a passing rider in this

desolate country would hear them.

He climbed down, went back to Ellie, and tried to make her believe that someone would find them. Dave Sanford perhaps.

"He must hate me," she sobbed. "The way I treated him. Seven years' bad luck—"

"The mirror!" Morgan cried, and rushed way I treated him. Seven years' bad flung her suitcase.

After skinning his shins on rocks and tripping over shoring, he finally found the mirror, or at least a large piece of it; enough to reflect sunlight.

He had been thinking of those times he had seen the reflection of the sun on binocular lenses.

"We've got a chance, Ellie! Like turning up aces in chuck-a-luck, or filling an inside straight."

Standing under the break in the ceiling, he held the glass so sunlight struck it and was reflected on a high bald cliff he had noticed rising beyond the fissure. Constantly he turned the mirror so the light danced crazily over the face of the stony rampart.

"Let's hope this mirror brings us seven years' luck—all of it good!"

BLUE HAWK had spent a day and a night trying to pick up Morgan's trail in Alameda Valley and at last had come to Sahuaro where from the shadows he heard how Wayne Morgan had taken Dave Sanford away from Kane's men. Blue Hawk grinned in the darkness. The Masked Rider had not been hanged as those men in the Sangres had claimed.

It warned him to hear his partner praised this way. But the pleasure faded when he trailed a group of riders to the livery stable. They talked of rustled horses and what they would do to Morgan when they caught him.

Blue Hawk mounted his gray and headed south. All night he rode and at dawn he saw a puzzling thing—a finger of light that moved back and forth across the face of a cliff some distance away.

Had Blue Hawk not shed his superstitions when he had acquired a mission school education, he would have fled in panic. His Yaqui relations would scream that this light was the eye of the Evil One who lived beneath the rocky Sangres.

Curiously Blue Hawk urged the gray toward the cliff. As he neared it he could see that it was some sort of reflection, appearing to come from out of the ground.

He was entering a plateau covered with house-sized boulders when he saw two riders dismounting some fifty yards ahead. They were looking at a crack in the ground from which reflection seemed to be coming.

Although Blue Hawk was not aware of identities, the flat-nosed rider was Mileaway Jones; his companion was Burt Cassing, another Wagonwheel rider.

Mileaway shouted into the crack in the ground. "That you been flashin' that light, Morgan?"

There was no answer.

Burt Cassing, a short man with a shell belt that sloped beneath a fat belly said, "Who else could it be but Morgan?"

Mileaway gingerly took a stick of dynamite from his hip pocket and prepared to light the long fuse with a match. "This'll fix him for good," he grunted, then added, "Good thing Denver spotted that light on the cliff."

Mileaway was striking a match on a rock when he saw Blue Hawk. Sight of the coppery-skinned Yaqui in white blouse and drill breeches froze him.

"Indians!" he yelled and, dropping match and dynamite to the soft ground, drew his guns.

Mileaway didn't hear the arrow above the roar of his guns, but he caught a glimpse of a feathered object hurtling through the air. Just a blur, then the thing was at his throat. The earth turned red and the sky wheeled sharply.

Seeing Mileaway dead on his feet, Burt Cassing tried to down that crazy redman with his Colts. But a searing pain tore at his side and he dropped the guns. Dazedly he stared at an arrow quivering under his right armpit, and he felt the warmth of his own blood in his throat.

The second arrow he never saw or felt.

Giving a weird, animal-like cry—the cry of a mountain cat—Blue Hawk grinned when he heard an answering cry from deep within the earth. The signal cry of Blue Hawk and the Masked Rider!

It took the mounts of the two dead men and the Yaqui's own gray to move the boulder with saddle ropes. When the opening was cleared, Morgan boosted a weak and shaken Ellie Patterson out of the Silver Queen.

There was no time to pause now, for Kane was still loose. With Ellie on Cassing's horse, and Morgan on Mileaway's mount, they streaked north. Reaching the deserted Hub, Morgan found his roan. He felt saddened at sight of Jody Tinker's body in the ranchyard and took a moment to carry the body into the bunkhouse and cover it with a blanket.

WITH Ellie's safety his first concern, Morgan led the girl and Blue Hawk at a gallop for Sahuaro. Circling the town he came up behind the Reverend Quimby's tent. Dave Sanford, his head bandaged, was talking to Quimby. At sight of Ellie he gave a glad cry. Sobbing, Ellie rushed into his arms.

From the center of town came the murmur of angry voices.

The plump sky pilot said, "Jabrow and his friends are finally convinced it's Kane who's behind the rustling."

Morgan gave Quimby a tight smile. "Something tells me you had a hand in convincing 'em."

Quimby's face reddened. "Sanford and Jake Pilson and Sheriff Brockton did it. Pilson finally got it through his thick head, and the sheriff is fit to be tied because he can't get out of bed and ride."

Morgan's lips tightened as he said, "We've cleared up most everything—except the Masked Rider." Giving Ellie and Dave Sanford a warm smile, he headed for his roan.

"Where you going?" Quimby cried.

Morgan waved a hand toward the northern ramparts of the Sangres. Then he was riding, with Blue Hawk at his side.

At a secret camp high in the Sangre de Dios Mountains Wayne Morgan saddled the Masked Rider's magnificent black stallion. When he took the stallion from the picket line, Blue Hawk's eyes watched him with devotion. They had been through much, this pair, and there was nothing the Yaqui would not do for his partner.

Trained by the Masked Rider from a colt, Midnight could thunder along the danger trails without shying from gunshots; he was by far the fastest horse Morgan had ever ridden.

From the stallion's saddlebags, Morgan took the Masked Rider's black accoutrements—peaked sombrero, domino mask, and long black cape. A perfect disguise, the insignia worn by the Masked Rider during all the years he had been riding as the Robin Hood of the West, his guns ever ready to aid those in trouble.

Upon donning the black garments a physical change seemed to take place in Morgan. No longer did he appear to be a drawling, slow-moving cowhand. Now he seemed to hold himself more erect, moved with brisk sureness. When he spoke his voice was crisp and authoritative.

Branded outlaw, the Masked Rider was a law unto himself—and no court of justice could honestly condemn his brand of law.

Beneath the mask his bronzed and ruggedly handsome face was grim as he thoughtfully calculated the odds against him. Then, stepping into Midnight's saddle, he lifted his hand to Blue Hawk. "We ride!"

* * * * *

Denver Kane had been scanning the valley through his binoculars. His heavy face was troubled as he swung the glasses toward the cliff behind the Silver Queen Mine. The flash of light that had attracted his attention was gone.

That was good. But so far he could catch no sign of Mileaway or Cassing.

Dobie Gilson had sneaked into Sahuaro and put his ear to the ground. The horse ranchers were stirring up trouble. It was time to move. Although Kane did not wish to move this horse herd until dark, he calculated there would not be too much risk if he ran them down to the valley, reaching there by sundown.

Cabrillo had upset his plans. He had come steaming up to the Sangres camp, yelling something about Rose Dewar doublecrossing him. In the general's mixed Spanish and English, Kane had not been able to get too much out of him.

THE general was to bring the gold and meet him at Paulo Ramos' shack at the foot of the Sangres. Kane figured to ride on ahead and count that gold. He didn't trust Cabrillo.

Now that Morgan was out of the way he felt better. He wasn't too worried about Jabrow and the other ranchers. He could handle them once he got rid of these horses.

Taking Dobie Gilson and Lon Dover with him, Kane yelled for his crew to keep the horses moving down the canyon, and spurred on ahead.

With full a dozen tough men back there, Kane felt sure of success. That is, he did until he was suddenly aware of a rumble somewhere on the trail behind him.

Looking back through the pines, he saw a great cloud of dust. Dobie Gilson, mounted on a chestnut, sat rigid in the saddle, his rust-colored hair touched by the breeze that always whipped through this deep canyon. Lon Dover's dark face whitened.

"What the hell!" he whispered, awed at the rumbling sound behind them.

A mile behind them the advance guard of a surging mass of frantic horses appeared, manes flying, the whites of their eyes showing.

Kane's mouth opened, and he dropped the cigar he had been smoking. When Dover started to panic and ride down-canyon, Kane ordered him back.

Waving a beefy hand at a trail that angled down from the cliff, Kane told his two riders to climb. Even though sweat broke out on his forehead, Kane would not let his men know that deep inside a flicker of fear was stirring.

Scrambling up the trail, they had just managed to clear the canyon floor when the maddened horses swept past. Kane saw his men, Smith and Haverlin and Petey Crane, trying to turn the herd at the next bend. Pete Crane's pinto upended, spilling him under those flashing hoofs. Haverlin was trying to fire his rifle at someone on a ledge, someone hidden from Kane's view by a stand of dwarf pines.

Haverlin suddenly threw up his hands. Plainly Denver Kane could see the arrow in the man's chest as he dropped from sight into the whirlpool of frightened horses.

Smith was firing a short gun. He had got in two shots when Kane heard the crack of a rifle above the roar of hoofs.

Smith dropped, his arms loose.

"You were right, Dover!" Kane cried. "There *are* Indians in these hills!"

CHAPTER XII

The Masked Rider!

HORSES were racing along the canyon. When the last of the herd had passed, Kane led his two men to the canyon floor. Some distance behind, he could hear the rattle of gunfire and knew that some outfit had jumped what remained of his crew.

Undecided whether to ride to the aid of his men or try and round up as many of the loose horses as he could, Kane's decision was made for him by Dobie Gilson's scream.

"Look!" Dobie was yelling, and pointing toward a ledge where a black-clad rider, mounted on a black stallion had appeared at the edge of the pines.

Kane felt cold sweat on the hairs at the back of his neck. "The Masked Rider!" he breathed. "The *real* Masked Rider this time!" Kane grinned, then he snapped, trying to make his grin dissipate the clawing fear in his belly, "I like to fight something I can see!"

The Masked Rider watched Kane, then signaling Blue Hawk, he cut down a trail that led to the canyon floor.

After mounting Midnight at the secret camp, the masked man had built a signal fire, figuring the wind and the surrounding cliffs so that the smoke would not so likely be spotted from the back country where he had finally seen Kane's herd of rustled horses moving downslope.

Already he had given the Reverend Quimby a general idea of the direction he had taken from town. The smoke did the rest.

Jabrow and Steele and Rand, with all the cowhands and townsmen they could get on horses, had come tearing into the Sangres. Seeing them clustered around the signal fire, arguing where to go next, the Masked Rider had deliberately shown himself.

The posse had lost no time in trying to ride him down. But Midnight had them at a disadvantage. Each time, just as they thought they had the Masked Rider trapped, Midnight would put on an extra burst of speed and leave them far behind.

As he neared the canyon where Kane's men were driving the horse herd, the Masked Rider watched for Blue Hawk. For he had told the Yaqui to stay within sight of the herd.

Seeing Blue Hawk, the Masked Rider had swooped down on the herd, waving his black cape. Frightened by the sudden appearance of this apparition on the black horse, some of the horses, already jumpy from being confined too long behind corral bars, took off. The others joined them.

By this time Jabrow and his crew had spotted the stampeded herd and Kane's men trying to turn them. The fight was on.

Seeing he was no longer needed here, the Masked Rider led Blue Hawk down the canyon, keeping to the rim. Behind them the firing increased. Looking back, the Masked Rider saw Kane's men going down under the guns of rancher and townsman.

Two of Kane's men who had stayed with the madly rushing herd of horses, spotted the Masked Rider. Blue Hawk took care of one with an arrow; the Masked Rider the other with his rifle.

Now as he rode to meet Kane, he felt an exhilaration in him because this would soon be over. The valley would again be at peace.

Suddenly as he reached the canyon floor, Blue Hawk screamed, "Senor! Behind you!"

Whirling Midnight in a tight circle, the Masked Rider's guns came up in a swift arc. Two of Kane's men had made a break from Jabrow's trap, the sound of their approach muffled by the roar of hoofs now fading down the canyon where the horses were running themselves out.

BLUE HAWK, exchanging his bow for a rifle, was firing. One of the riders tall and black-bearded, lurched in the saddle. Grabbing the saddle-horn he tried to maintain his balance, but his swerving horse unseated him. He fell loosely to the canyon floor.

The Masked Rider's guns swept in a swift arc from beneath the black cloak. They spat orange flame. The other rider, hatless, long hair flying in the wind, was trying to trigger a rifle. The force of those bullets hitting his body knocked him rolling.

This gave Kane time to close in. Spurring at a dead run, Kane sent Gilson and Lon Dover wide to try and pin the masked man and his Yaqui companion against the cliff wall. Midnight, appearing to be momentarily blocked, pivoted. Gilson fired point-blank, but the pivoting Midnight saved the Masked Rider's life.

As the Masked Rider spurred the black horse, he triggered his right-hand gun. Gilson wilted in his saddle, the front of

his shirt shot to rags. Three jumps of his frightened horse and he was pitched head-first to the canyon floor.

Lon Davis had been trying to convince his boss that there were Indians in these mountains. Now he had the proof, but it would do him little good. Trying to kill this white-clad Indian in revenge for the death of his partner, Jake, Lon Dover overstepped himself.

Believing the redman to be deadlier with a bow than with a rifle which he was now using, Dover tried jumping his horse in close to the Yaqui's gray for a close shot. Blue Hawk shot him twice. Badly wounded, Dover had enough, and made a break for it. Blue Hawk took out after him.

Kane, hoping his two men would down his enemies, hung back at the last moment during that wild charge. Now, faced by this masked man, he knew he had to fight or die.

As he was lifting his guns, the Masked Rider cried in a terrible voice: "You committed murder in my name! Now you shall pay!"

Those words put a chill across Kane's shoulders such as he had never experienced before. To show his defiance, he threw back his head and laughed. "You sound like a two-bit actor I heard once in a tent show!"

But there was no laughter in his heart. As he tipped his head back to laugh, his right-hand gun, held tight against his hip out of sight, exploded.

The Masked Rider felt the slash of that bullet against the black cloak. The hammers of his guns lifted and fell, and Kane, seeing his ruse had failed, tried again. By sheer will power he managed to point a gun, but there was no strength to pull the trigger. The gun dropped. Kane dropped after it.

A roar of hoofbeats from up the canyon alerted the Masked Rider. Wheeling Midnight, he saw Jabrow and his men riding the curve in the canyon. Jabrow threw up a rifle. The bald-headed Jake Pilson knocked his arm down.

"Don't shoot the Masked Rider!" Pilson yelled, "He's killed Denver Kane!"

But Jabrow, believing as so many did that the Masked Rider was an outlaw, knowing that he had a price on his head, fired. But by this time the rider on that black stallion had vanished, the hoofs of his magnificent horse sending a mocking challenge back to them.

Pounding along the canyon, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk ran head-on into General Cabrillo's five riders. The plump Mexican, worried when he had seen Jabrow's riders head into the Sangres, had come to give Kane a hand if he needed it. But discreetly he had let his men take the lead. Bravery was for fools, he had decided long ago. And when he saw this masked man and the Yaqui he was glad he had accepted this philosophy. His men, trying to fight, were falling.

GENERAL CABRILLO turned his horse, to flee. The horse stumbled, lost stride, but continued gamely. The general's heart had literally been in his throat at that moment. At last, when the firing behind him faded to a whisper, he began to regain his courage.

So what if Kane *had* run into trouble? He shrugged. There were other places to buy horses. He had gold. With gold you could buy anything.

A mile from Paulo Ramos' mud and octillo pole shack the general's horse collapsed. Instead of being grateful that the wounded horse had carried him this far, he cursed it as he put a bullet into its head.

Gun in hand he started off for Ramos' shack on foot. Fifty yards from the shack he saw a dust cloud coming from the direction of town. Out of the dust cloud he saw riders. Squinting his eyes he saw that fellow they called Dave Sanford and Ellie Patterson. And yes—damn her black soul—Rose Dewar. He could see the spot of white her bandaged right arm made.

Now behind him he heard a new and terrible sound. Hoofbeats. Looking over his shoulder he saw the Masked Rider and the Yaqui spurring toward him.

Frantically he began to run. Sweat darkened his face. He still had time to reach the shack. In the yard he caught one of Paulo Ramos' burros by a long ear and yanked it against him. When he tried to mount, the burro kicked him in the thigh.

Cursing, Cabrillo trembled with rage and fear and pain. His leg throbbed. And there in an open window was his old corporal, Paulo Ramos. Ramos, his face a mass of welts from the saddle ropes of Cabrillo's men, was laughing.

"Laugh!" Cabrillo shouted, and fired his big silver-mounted pistol.

Ramos staggered, but he did not lose his grip on the ancient shotgun he had laid across the window sill.

"For the glory of Mexico!" he cried at Cabrillo in Spanish, and pulled both triggers.

When the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk reached the shack they saw Sanford, his arm about Ellie, holding a gun. Rose Dewar, her arm in a sling, was staring at two dead men. There was compassion in her eyes for Paulo Ramos. But when they turned on Cabrillo's dead face, she said, "Truly you are the son of a pig. And you died like one."

The Masked Rider had slowed Midnight, holding up his right hand.

"You are Dave Sanford?" he inquired of the man with the bandaged head. When Sanford said he was, the Masked Rider told him, "I have seen the notices you put up in the mountains. Why do you wish to see me?"

"I wanted to interview you."

"There isn't time," the masked man said, for in the distance came the rumble of hoofs—Jabrow's riders. "But you have seen the Masked Rider, the real one. Denver Kane is dead. You have nothing to fear."

Sanford lowered his gun and tightened his arm about Ellie Patterson's waist. Ellie, the amazement in her eyes at sight of this black-clad figure fading, smiled. She put out her hand to Rose Dewar.

AS JABROW and his crowd burst out of the foothills, the Masked Rider lifted his hand to the three who stood before the mud-walled house. Then, touching the spurs to Midnight, he gave that weird animal cry. Blue Hawk answered. Together they flashed across the basin, outdistancing the pursuers at every jump.

Dave Sanford said, awed, "I've seen the Masked Rider. Wait till I write this story!"

Ellie frowned. "But I thought you were going to be a rancher, not a newspaperman."

Sanford squeezed her hand. "Just this one last story. We owe it to a friend of ours who believed in the Masked Rider."

"A friend?"

"Wayne Morgan."

Ellie Patterson's eyes widened. Quickly she stared at the fading cloud of yellow dust that marked the passing of the Masked Rider from the valley.

"Wayne Morgan," she murmured. "You don't suppose that he could be—"

Dave Sanford shook his head. "That's something we'll never know."

But for a long moment their eyes held as if they suddenly realized they possibly shared a startling secret—a secret never to be revealed to another living person. Solemnly they turned for their horses where Rose Dewar was waiting, and rode back toward Sahuaro.

COMING UP NEXT ISSUE

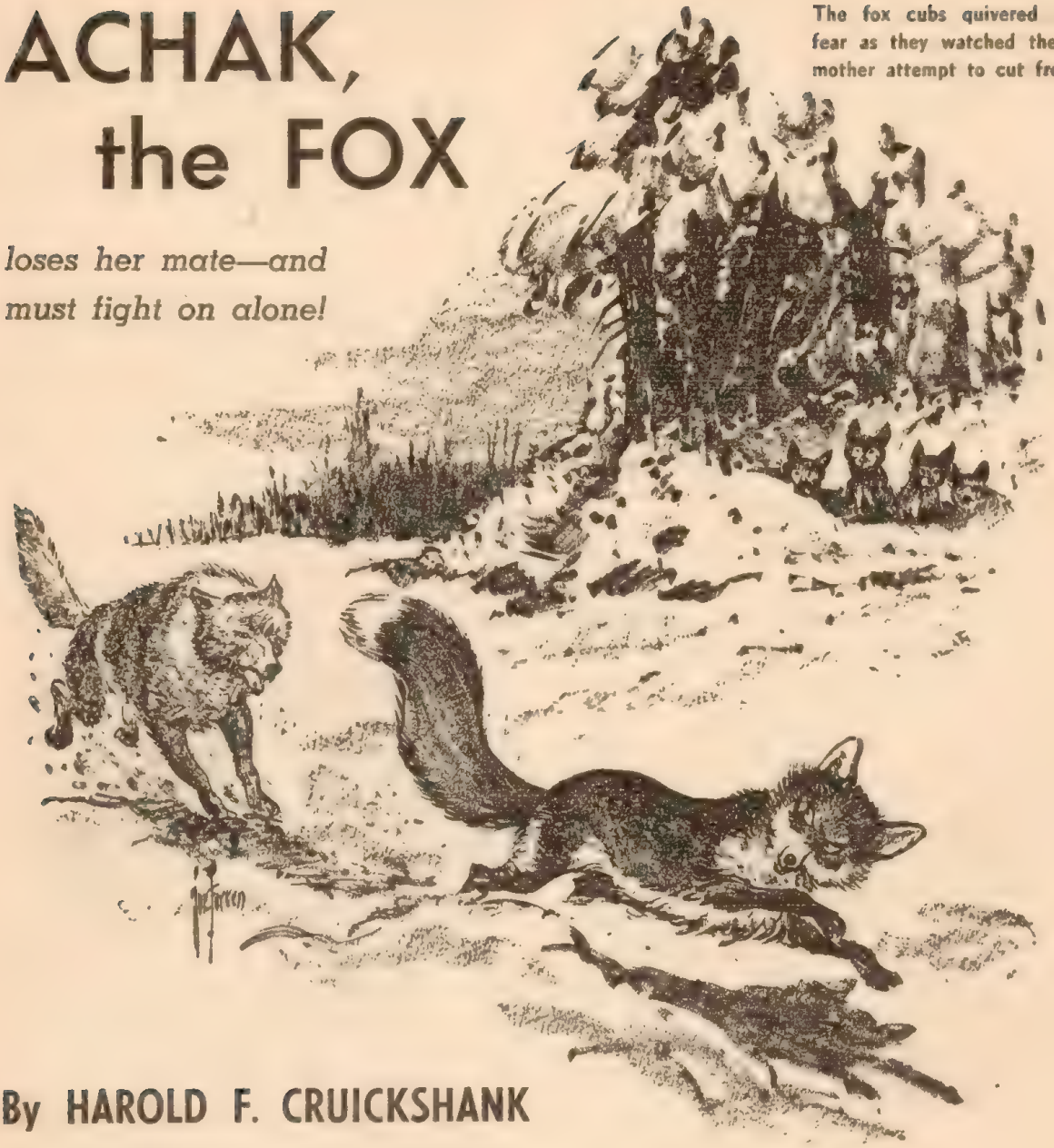
GUNS FOR GERONIMO

A Stirring New MASKED RIDER Novel

by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

ACHAK, the FOX

loses her mate—and must fight on alone!



The fox cubs quivered in fear as they watched their mother attempt to cut free

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

WHEN she heard the rippling thunderclap, Achak, the beautiful red vixen, barked sharply, sending her five cublings plunging for the cover of the dogwood shrubs which screened their den.

Achak whirled and bounded to a rise of land near by. Head erect, she sat behind a light screening of rosebush scrub. Her large ears were sharply pricked forward, and her nose quivered as she pointed south in the direction of the creek. It was from that area that the thunderclap—which was really the booming of a gun—came in the early dawn, and Achak quivered as if, instinctively, she associated Nista, her handsome cross-fox mate, with that awe-inspiring thunder.

There was movement now between the willow clumps at the creek meadow. Achak shuffled forward on her stern and bared her fangs.

It was Nista at the meadow, but the big dog fox was making slow progress. His

hind quarters dragged. Achak gave out a sharp, husky bark, but there was no response from her mate. She saw him fall, and a large object dropped from his jaws.

Achak licked her chops and cocked her head on one side. Again she called, but Nista lay where he had fallen.

More than once both adult foxes had raided the chicken runs of the man creature in the two years since his intrusion here on their range.

The man creature had cursed them, but Achak and her life's mate seemed to grin as they eluded the man and his dog. Once they had boldly rounded on the dog, confusing him with their skilful maneuvering, and only then made a break and lost their trail in the long stretch of gravel-bottomed creek to northward.

Achak and Nista had raided the homestead yard only when the biological cycle caused an almost complete disappearance of the ruffed grouse in their favorite hunting draw.

Achak searched wind as she moved in a wide circle. Satisfied that there was no danger sign, she stole in, sneaking belly-down toward her fallen mate, and cringed as the scent of his fresh blood frightened her. Nista tried to raise his head at her approach, but it sagged heavily.

Close to his clamped jaws lay a big bird with long, handsome tail feathers.

THERE was a sudden crackling of brush near the creek. Like a streak, Achak leaped, seized the rooster in her jaws, and whirled away. She swung wide of her den area, as the heavy-footed man creature came up on her fatally wounded mate.

The westering sun seemed to have plunged into the bowl of the small lake to the north before Achak gave out a series of sharp, rusty-toned barks which brought her young ones tumbling up through the thickets to join her.

She stripped the fowl of most of his heaviest feathers, then tossed him playfully high and caught him a time or two before throwing the limp shape to the younglings.

She watched them rip and tear, listened to their immature snarls as they fought for possession of tidbits. This was their first feast of fresh meat, and Achak was careful when she caught one cracking green bone. He was instantly buffeted away. Later, when a bigger kill was made, she would allow the cubs to gnaw heavier green bone for its calcium content.

A strict disciplinarian, Achak was also the most devoted mother in all the Lost Valley country. Often she had fought against heavy odds to protect her cubs; often she had lost when eagles and larger predatory beasts had, in famine times, slain her youngling brood.

When the last vestige of meat had been gulped, the cubs licked their chops and waddled to Achak's side. She stretched out flat and allowed them to nurse until they tumbled away, grunting in the misery of slightly over-stuffed bellies.

As twilight sifted down over the wilderness and the weird cry of old Moakwa, the loon sentinel, proclaimed the passing of another day, Achak sat up and blinked at the fading shadow shapes which were slowly merging with the softly purpled cloak of night.

Achak did not return to the borning den of her young. For some days, as she scouted, she caught the dread tang of man and dog creatures and moved her brood to the north of the lake where a belt of spruce held back the lesser, deciduous growth.

Here, where shafts of sunlight lanced down through occasional ports in the timber and formed patterned clearings, she watched her cubs thrive as they snapped at crickets and grasshoppers and now and then made bold attack on an unwary field mouse.

The freaks of Achak's brood were a beautiful and sturdy dog cub with the handsome cross markings of his father already beginning to show as his first grayish coat tones gave place to the more mature markings; and a pretty little dark vixen that would become a rich silver at maturity. The other three cubs, pretty

enough, were true reds, already stepping into their black-booted markings.

The morning sunlight splashed them, and Achak blinked at the changing hues which flashed from their coats, and her handsome brush weaved from side to side as a pair of cubs played with it.

As the summer moved into its fulness of dense, dripping growth, pests came, and Achak began the training of her young. Cunningly, she taught them how to rid their coats of mites by swimming low in the lake water, with only the tips of their noses showing, then suddenly submerging for a brief second, to drown the pests which had crept to that lone island of their anatomy.

At the weaning season, Achak took the younglings on many a stalk through the thickets, teaching them patience as she pressed her body flat to the leaf mould and writhed toward an unsuspecting brood of hatchling ruffed grouse. Many a brood got away, but there were times when the hen grouse failed to rally her scattered younglings in time. Achak and her cubs fed well on such occasions.

When a cub broke in his overeagerness to attack, Achak nipped him sharply and snarled savagely, sending him cringing back with his brush low.

ONE evening, the mother fox took the brood out for a long expedition, held them close to her rear, while she deliberately crept close to the man creature's fence. When the big dog creature barked, Achak froze, and the little ones, though they quivered with fright, emulated her every movement. Achak was letting them learn the tang of man and dog scent.

She circled the homestead area and slipped under the lower rail of a fence, leading in to the edge of a meager strip of standing oats. She sniffed sharply, searching wind, then with a softly gasped sound, which set the cubs stiffly on their haunches, she broke. From the edge of the field, expertly turned into an open clearing, a jack rabbit bounded.

With the element of surprise in her favor, Achak was able swiftly to cut the jack back; then she barked a signal to her cubs, bringing them into fanwise action.

As he saw the five threats, the jack bounded high and whirled to double, but Achak leaped in and struck with perfect timing and accuracy.

She almost completely pelted the limp kill, then sat back on her haunches to watch the youngling cubs start their first big feast. This time she did not interfere, for the rabbit bones were bigger. Only now and then, when sharp fights threatened, did Achak discipline her young.

When the last tasty drool was licked from their jaws, Achak turned her brood toward the lake area.

As they skirted the homestead fence, a soft seductive tang reached them, causing two of the cubs to turn back, but Achak snarled. She was not fooled by the inviting fragrance of the fox baits set by the man creature.

She snapped at the little silver's legs, and when the little one displayed resentment with a nip of her little fangs, Achak struck her sharply with closed jaws, sending her rolling a good distance.

More than once in her years of ranging Lost Valley Achak had seen the downfall of a young fox whose nose had been touched by the delicate aroma of the deadly bait with which the man creatures lured the wildlings into steel traps or into cord or wire snares.

As the family moved on, now trotting, now mincing with delicate and soundless steps, small creatures scuttled to cover.

Suddenly, Achak froze, her right forepaw folded daintily as from the sere tamarac country to the east of the lake there came the high-pitched cry of a dog coyote.

Her every nerve fiber grew taut and slack by turns, as the coyote wail broke into a series of crazy yaps and yodels. Yot, the coyote and his kind, were among her greatest enemies, especially in winter when the snows were deep and their speed and maneuverability was greater than Achak's.

Snarling softly, she circled her brood, conveying a caution to them as they sat with their large-eared heads cocked to

catch every coyote sound.

Thus Achak continued her instruction of the brood. In former years, Nista, her mate, had assisted with the rearing and training of the young; now, Achak was alone and her responsibilities great.

Soon after she bedded the well-fed younglings down on a bed of soft leaf mould in the timber cloister. Then she whisked about the area, scouting wisely before joining her brood and, with her sharp nose to the soft wind, settling to rest.

ACHAK! The Indians had named the beautiful vixen well. Achak—the spirit, the soul.

She whipped about her range with the elusiveness of a phantom, and this morning, before her cubs were aware that she had left them, returned, panting sharply, with a fat hen for their breakfast.

Toward sunset, a flight of geese winged over and landed at a grassy marsh at the south end of the lake. They came down from their nesting waters to exercise their maturing goslings and to feed on the marsh grass. Achak was quick to catch their voice sounds.

The man, too, had heard. A feed of roast wild goose was something he and his wife looked forward to each early autumn when a band dropped to feed at the marsh grass.

Achak gathered her cubs and stalked through a wild fruit thicket to a chain of willows in the meadow flat. Belly down, she licked her drooling chops. When the little silver vixen, always the most ambitious of the brood, sidled up, snapping her eager jaws, Achak gasped a warning and laid a forepaw heavily on the youngling's back.

The long necks of the sentinel geese bent as they returned to their feeding. Achak resumed her slithering stalk, pausing every few feet to raise her head carefully and peer through the longer slough grass that fringed the feeding flat.

A fickle wind veered, and Achak stiffened as a faint tang of man scent struck her nostrils. but she subsided again when the breeze settled to its prevailing southeasterly course. A backward glance showed her that her cubs were obediently observing her instructions.

She moved on, her black boots making little more sound than the whispering breeze. She drew in her head and flattened her body as a handsome young gander moved toward her, plucking tender grass shoots. He made soft chutterings as he fed, waddling closer and closer. Suddenly, every muscle and sinew prepared, Achak sprang.

Raucous honkings sounded, broad wings flapped, but Achak clung to her fang hold. The cubs rushed in, but the main goose band was in flight.

Came a terrifying clap of thunder! Achak dropped the limp gander and rushed to the long grass, scattering her cubs. Suddenly she buckled at the right foreleg as flame gouted again and the valley rang with the blast of the man-made thunder. Two more crashes sounded, as Achak recovered. Three cubs darted past her and into the willows.

Achak attempted to wheel, to double, as valiantly and devotedly she quickly searched for the little black vixen and a red cub. Then she caught the baying of the dog creature, and with her wounded forepaw raised, she struck off toward the south.

Before long, it became necessary to put weight on the wounded paw, for the dog had fallen for Achak's planned baiting. He had followed her trail, as she exposed herself from time to time in a noble effort to draw the enemy from her cubs.

Almost at the point of exhaustion, she reached the creek and plunging into the water, turned upstream.

She swam to the shallow, gravel-bed stretch and limped along until she reached a leaning windfall which had blown into the stream. Painfully she climbed this bridge and leaped from it into a clump of scrub brush.

Ears cocked, she listened. The dog creature's baying was distant, as he searched in vain along the creek bank for her trail.

NOT for some time did the wounded mother vixen stir. When she rose, her right forelimb had stiffened, and it was at some cost of energy that she at last reached the lake zone. There she gave out sharp little gasps as she searched for her two missing cublings. There was no sign of either the red or the little silver vixen.

A light frost had settled over the zone when Achak dragged her spent form into the timber cloister where her remaining cubs greeted her riotously. The missing red was there, and Achak licked him devotedly as she gasped soft, reassuring throat sounds for all.

Her kill, the big young gander, was not at the grass flat. Man would have his roast goose, but Achak and her brood went hungry to their fitful sleep. . . .

For the rest of the fall and winter, Achak held her four matured younglings with her. As her shoulder healed, she hunted over the snow-covered range, digging and burrowing for hidden grouse.

Out on the frozen, snow-covered lake this morning, she clawed and bit at a muskrat house and was thus busily engaged when one of her young ones sounded a warning. She whirled, and her body quivered when she saw her arch-enemy, the dog coyote, approaching.

Achak bounded high in a series of leaps, but the snow was deep and her legs short. The coyote, with his longer legs, made greater speed and whirled to cut her off.

The fox cubs sat on their haunches, quivering in their fear, as they watched their mother attempt to cut free, but the coyote was closing in.

Now he bunched himself to leap, and in that instant, Achak bounded high, cleared his crouched form and struck his trail. Like the red phantom she was, she raced swiftly over his tracks.

It was a moment or so before the coyote could regain his equilibrium. Now he bounded at full leap, but suddenly Achak left his trail. She raced for a long, wind-blown ridge and headed directly toward the habitat of the man creature.

When she reached the frozen creek, her strength was almost gone. The coyote was gaining. Tongue lolling, he drove on, but Achak leaped into a thicket and made straight for the homeyard of the man creature.

Near one of the log buildings the dog was gnawing on a beef bone, by one of the log buildings. As a red and black streak flashed by, he reared himself to all fours.

With great cunning, Achak wheeled, doubled back in her tracks, then with a swift break, cut to eastward.

The dog coyote skidded to a halt, his back humped, brush low, as the snarling dog, more than three time his weight, charged.

Achak sat on her haunches in a near-by covert, her head cocked to catch the sounds of the chase and the mad snarls when the dog creature at last caught up with the spent coyote.

The vixen was licking her chops in keen contentment when suddenly there reached her a low, familiar voice sound. She whirled toward a small compound, and her every nerve fiber tingled when she saw and scented her missing little silver vixen.

Cautiously Achak circled the compound, a small enclosure constructed of tightly laid tamarack rails. Having reconnoitered, she backed away and packed snow for better footing. She bunched and leaped but failed to reach within a foot of the top rail.

She dropped lightly to the snow-covered ground and rolled with the fall. Inside the compound, the young silver vixen leaped and fell heavily. Achak moved in close to the rails and gave out soft, husky voice sounds of reassurance and caution.

AGAIN she backed away, snuffling the acrid tang of woodsmoke from her nostrils. Her keen native cunning became whetted by the desire to rescue of her young one.

One factor that the man had not taken into account when he built his high rail

fence was that although the stockade was too high for a fox to leap, the fox, especially one of Achak's intelligence, was a great climber.

When a shack door banged and a shrill whistle sounded, Achak bellied down, quivering, close to the compound.

There was a crunching of snow and again the frightening whistles, but the man creature did not approach. The door slammed again and Achak relaxed.

Once more she backed away, cocked her head on one side, then bunched her black-booted feet under her. Hippety-hopping daintily forward, as though on steel springs, she suddenly leaped, and clung with her paws to a bowed rail. She held firmly, then paw by paw she climbed until at last she reached the top rail. She teetered there a moment before dropping lightly to the ground within the compound.

Again and again, under Achak's coaching, the little silver vixen attempted the leap and climb. Each time she lost her hold and fell heavily.

But the mother fox had undying patience. When the faint scent of another dog creature reached her, she whirled and struck the silver in a flank. The youngling backed away, crouching, bunching, her glowing eyes fixed in a steady glare on her objective.

Now she leaped superbly, and her paws gripped and held an in-bowed rail.

Achak gasped soft reassurance, and the pretty youngling started her climb. She slipped but regained footing and slowly, perseveringly, she made the climb. She was down in the clear before Achak, the red phantom, rejoined her.

As soon as the adult vixen struck the ground, she whirled, for the dog creature was coming slowly, painfully, up from the creek zone . . .

Achak and her young one circled the zone with the freshening breeze in their favor. Now Achak halted, and with forepaw raised and head cocked, she glared at the stumbling form of the big dog. His head was low, and one of his ears hung as if nearly severed as he limped slowly toward the house, favoring his right forepaw.

When the shack door slammed and steam gushed, Achak bounded forward and streaked across the creek. Beyond the meadow flat she came to a halt, blowing sharply. Her canines protruded sharply over her underlip as she began to circle a starkly stiff creature. It was the dog coyote, her arch-enemy. The dog creature had won the chase and the battle, but not without cost, and as she turned to flick her young one with her warm tongue, Achak peeled back her lips as if conscious that, by her great cunning, she had brought about the end of one enemy and the wounding of another. . . .

A warm chinook wind fanned the wilderness range, though it was still midwinter. Achak fluffed out her handsome coat and surveyed her handsome brood.

The deep snow about the lake zone had begun to honeycomb, as the temperature rose hour by hour. Shortly the surface would become packed, making for better hunting for creatures as light as Achak and her kind.

This evening, alone, she turned her sharp nose toward the habitat of the man creature. Not for many nights had she heard the big dog bay in answer to the wailing of the distant coyotes.

NOW on the soft breeze there came a warm tang, the scent of poultry out in their yard. This rarely happened in wintertime. The scent was tantalizing to Achak who, with her young, had fared lightly during a recent sharp cold spell.

She sprinted on to the south. Man, her chief enemy, had hurt her, yet his habitat was now a source of food. Despite her bitterness, Achak still retained an instinctive respect for him and a fear of him.

As she neared the homestead yard, she bellied down. There was only an hour of half-light left. Head cocked, she heard the chutterings of the hens and young roosters as they scrabbled on bundle oats before retiring for the night.

The dog creature's scent was strong and fresh, and Achak's keen sense of smell

located its source. Cautiously, she stole in, slithering over the good footing on the packed snow.

Only a low fence separated her from her quarry. The unwary poultry scratched vigorously among the oat sheaves.

Achak cleared the fence with no effort and crouched in a shadowy corner. She glided forward, her brush dragging behind her on the snow. Then she struck, and the biggest, fattest hen was seized.

Instantly a raucous squawking was set up by the alarmed flock. The shack door opened and slammed shut. The man creature whistled, and Achak heard the voice sound of the dog before she had cleared the fence, the hen still flapping in her jaws.

Achak sprinted across the frozen creek, every nerve fiber tingling as she heard the bellowed voice sounds of the man and the yelping of the dog. She dropped her prey to get a better jaw hold on it, and in that brief instant, cast a sharp glance backward. The man was hurrying toward the creek, the dog trailing, still limping.

Achak tossed the heavy bird in her jaws and, with head high, bounded forward. Something whined viciously past her before she could reach cover. It was followed at once by a boom of man-made thunder. But the little red phantom had reached cover, and although there were more terrifying thunder claps, no harm came to her. . . .

After her feed of chicken, Achak licked her chops, and sat back to watch her mature younglings battle for the remainder of the hen's carcass.

Suddenly she stiffened, then whirled about on her rump. Out of the east, and the deepening purple of fast falling night, had come the squally barks of a wandering dog fox.

Achak's beautiful coat fluffed out. The little silver vixen spun, but Achak sprang to intercept her. Then she threw up her muzzle and gave out an answering cry.

Shortly, she was mincing toward the neck of the lake but stopped with a foreleg curled up, when a magnificent dog fox, a handsome black, bounded toward her.

Achak's beautiful brush began to wave from side to side. Suddenly, as if her brain had become charged with a latent instinct far sharper than any she had ever before known, Achak peeled back her lips in a grin of disfavor. Her hackles rose.

She sensed her age when the beautiful black dog fox minced up to her and made his appealing advances in grandiose fashion. She snarled and arched her back, and her brush weaved in precise, emphatic expression of her unreceptive mood.

All at once, a dark streak flashed by, and Achak whirled to see her pretty little silver daughter flash by.

Champing her jaws, clacking her fangs, the vixen queen of Lost Valley glared as she watched the beautiful pair race into the impenetrable gloom.

Hearing a soft gasp from her remaining young ones, she whirled. She bounded high and led them through the timber belt to a new range where the grouse were still fat.

Thus she abdicated in favor of her silver vixen daughter, and as she led her four eager broodling members on, she seemed to be suddenly revitalized with a keen desire for the hunt, for the feast.

ONE by one, her young ones left her. When the first spring winds fanned the snow-covered lake and free-running water began to tinkle, Achak returned to her old haunts. For a time she stood on a rise of land, with spring sunlight splashing her still prime coat. Then, at last, she turned and trotted into the thickets—and vanished with the stealth of the phantom for which she had been so aptly named.

A Rib-Tickling Novel of a Cowboy Who Couldn't Use Guns—or Fists!

BRAND FOR A MAVERICK by Walker A. Tompkins

Featured in March EXCITING WESTERN — On Sale Now!

Would Carnwright escape from the pit where the outlaws left him to die—or would the horrible hole claim another victim?

HELL'S STRAWBOSS

by t. c. mcclary

CHAPTER I

Den of the Damned

AT THE narrowest point of Rustlers' Gulch the riders had to duck in order to pass under the stone bridge. Beyond that, the gulch walls had been sheered and smoothed by some forgotten river that once had boiled through here.

The outlaw leader lifted his arm in a signal and drew a hard rein on his cruel Spanish bit. His inspection of the walls was a dramatic gesture that pleased him. He knew every inch of that gulch.

"Little crack up there might give a man a hand hold if he could reach it," he allowed. "Not much more'n a hundred feet up."

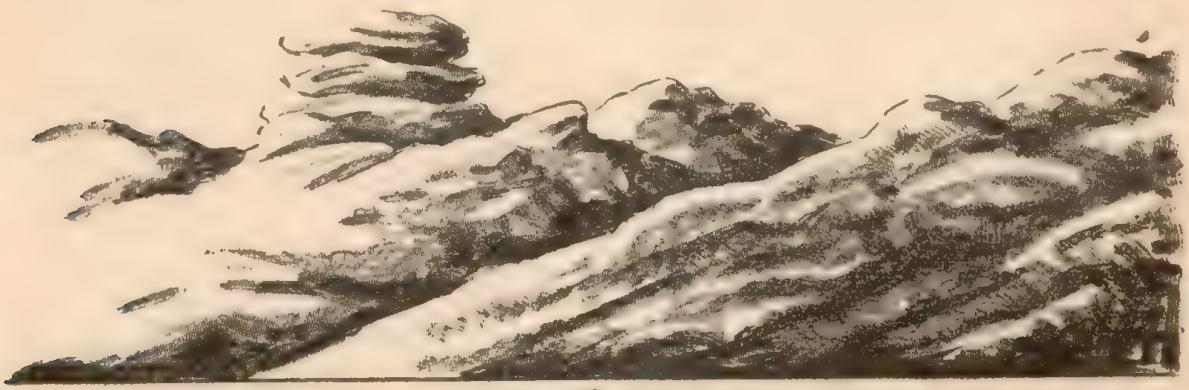
He turned in the saddle and looked at the man who rode behind him and whose hands were tied to his pommel. "No reach a-tall for a man as high and mighty as a range lord!" The outlaw chuckled. "I wouldn't want your pride hurt, stooping again to go under that bridge. That's why we aim to blow the hole full, Carnwright." He jerked his head at one of his hard-case riders. "Leave the dynamite here."

"Heap of work, when you could shoot a man," Carnwright said.

He was cool; he had guts. But his words betrayed the pure arrogance of a young man who'd filled his father's boots but had not yet broken his own feet to them.

"You know, you're a fresh little snoot," the outlaw rasped. "If you hadn't been so full of yourself, you might not be here. You'd have played smart and made a deal with me, or you'd have come after me with an army. You wouldn't have been damn fool enough to think I'd take your high-toned warning and just clear out of the country and then travel without a bodyguard."

Carnwright looked at him with contempt. "You can still shoot me, and my hands are tied. Haven't you got the guts?"



A Novelet

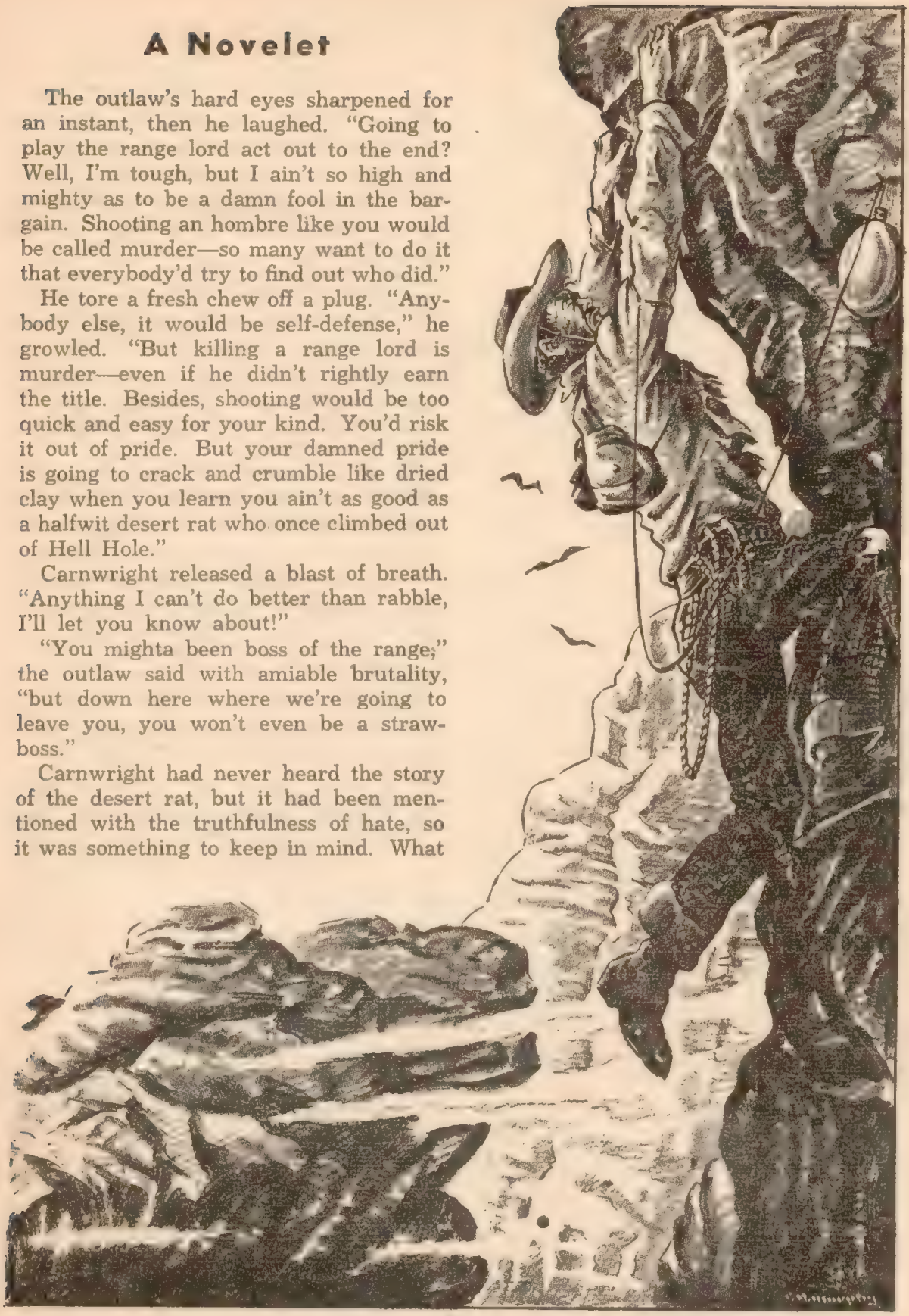
The outlaw's hard eyes sharpened for an instant, then he laughed. "Going to play the range lord act out to the end? Well, I'm tough, but I ain't so high and mighty as to be a damn fool in the bargain. Shooting an hombre like you would be called murder—so many want to do it that everybody'd try to find out who did."

He tore a fresh chew off a plug. "Anybody else, it would be self-defense," he growled. "But killing a range lord is murder—even if he didn't rightly earn the title. Besides, shooting would be too quick and easy for your kind. You'd risk it out of pride. But your damned pride is going to crack and crumble like dried clay when you learn you ain't as good as a halfwit desert rat who once climbed out of Hell Hole."

Carnwright released a blast of breath. "Anything I can't do better than rabble, I'll let you know about!"

"You mighta been boss of the range," the outlaw said with amiable brutality, "but down here where we're going to leave you, you won't even be a straw-boss."

Carnwright had never heard the story of the desert rat, but it had been mentioned with the truthfulness of hate, so it was something to keep in mind. What



one man could do another could do—if he could find the way.

THE cavalcade dropped down to the desert and were now riding in heat that was like a furnace blast upon the face. The last part of the way was over a bed of lava. The dancing heat literally fried their bare flesh, but the bed would hold no tracks.

At length the outlaw barked a rough command and a slat-eyed man rode closer and cut Carnwright's thongs. The leader said to Carnwright, "Get down!"

Carnwright dismounted, went to his saddle canteen and wet a bandanna to rub his chafed wrists. There was some palaver between the chief and a man riding a pinto that had been stolen from Carnwright's rough string. The latter took the pony to a bluff and getting afoot, slashed it with his quirt. The animal jumped, and the man stood there, studying the result a space. Then he drew his gun and shot down at it and hobbled back. He moved gingerly, raising his feet as if they hurt.

"Chief," he complained, "those rocks are like a stove top."

"Shut up!" the outlaw leader ordered. Then he said, "All right. Ride my pony. I'll be riding Carnwright's horse anyway."

He swung down and made the switch. He sat in Carnwright's saddle as pleased and self-conscious as a kid at the throttle of a real engine.

"Damn nice present, Carnwright," he grunted. "I won't forget you for this."

Carnwright looked up at him with cold mockery in his ice-gray eyes. "Just a loan, not a present," he said. "Take care of her, and I might just shoot you instead of putting you in the blister box at Tucson for thirty years."

The outlaw wagged his head. "You got a nice sense of humor, mister. Too bad we had to cross instead of drink together." He studied the range lord for sign of fear or worry, but found none. A grudging respect showed in his hard and brutal eyes. "Any last request?" he asked Carnwright, almost politely.

"My saddlebags," Carnwright answered, nodding toward them.

Filled with suspicion, the outlaw pivoted and searched the bags for a gun. He found nothing but emergency trail rations and some odds and ends.

He growled, "What the hell, you ain't such a bad hombre," and threw the saddlebags down.

"Take his canteen?" Slateye asked.

"Naw, fill it up so he'll have time to figure there was one man on the range bigger and tougher than he is!"

Growling, Slateye filled Carnwright's canteen from his own. "The chief is soft," he sneered. "If it was my way, I'd leave you chili peppers!"

Carnwright thought to himself: Rule of the whip. If he turned his back, there isn't one in the pack wouldn't jump him out of jealousy and hatred.

The idea bit into his thoughts and stuck there. He didn't like being in the same class, but he had used the whip a good deal himself since he had taken his father's place.

The outlaw leader gave him a mocking salute. In a mincing voice, round with great appreciation for his own humor, he said, "So nice to have met you. We'll be holding camp right near here three evenings off. Little party in honor of your friend McClellan. He won't be there, but you're invited to come when you see our fire."

It was clear from that that they meant to raid McClellan who had stock grazing up in that wild and desolate barrens country, having been forced there by Carnwright's refusal to let him have the Pot Sink water hole.

The outlaw was laughing uproariously. He stopped suddenly and wigwagged an order and swung Carnwright's beautiful black quarterbred mare back toward the gulch. The hard tattoo of the horses' hoofbeats swamped out into the simmering heat. Carnwright picked up his saddlebags and moved off the lava. The horsemen were already ghosts, shimmering and sinking into the glare, when he

looked their way.

The desert's hot and lonely silence dropped over him like a weight. No place in the world is so lonesome as a sunken desert. Neither so lonesome nor so hot. And this was Hell Hole, with only one entrance.

Even as he thought of that, he heard a dull rumble in the distance, a dull rumble that rose and then grumbled away into silence. The outlaws had used their dynamite. Hell Hole's one entrance was blocked off.

"So they brought me way out here to die?" Carnwright mused; and at once came the thought: "The damn fools, expecting a range lord to fold up and die like one of the herd!"

HE SCOOPED a hole in the sand well below the surface heat. He sat down in it and scooped a smaller, deeper hole close by. Into it he dumped the contents of his saddlebags and brushed sand over them. Then he took his boots off before his feet began to swell. He stuck his feet into the saddlebags and put his boots under him and adjusted his clothes so as to get the most protection from the sun.

He hunched forward and folded his arms on his knees to think. The desert wasn't big but it was a trap. Northward, the land tilted up to the rim of a half-mile gorge, and at its bottom ran sixteen miles of raging rapids—even if a man could get down there. Eastward lay a mass of dome-shaped lava hills that not even a lizard could cross. Southward were forty miles of arid, canyoned plateau. Westward, a sheer rock wall reached straight up to grass country through which a man could find a way. That wall, however, was sheer for its whole height, and it was three hundred feet high at the lowest point.

But a desert rat had found a way out of here, the outlaw had said, and a desert rat would have no more equipment than Carnwright did, except, perhaps, his prospector's pick.

All he had to do, then, was survive the heat until he found that place, somewhere along the five or six miles of wall, and then find enough strength in his body to pull him out of there.

"That's all!" he thought ironically. It never struck him that he might be whipped. Hell's bells, he was still the range lord. He still held the whip.

The sun made the sky an inverted cauldron that poured out shriveling heat, and the desert became as hot as the griddle of a stove. The slightest movement brought fresh, scorching pain to his body. The airs were burned out, lifeless, and searing to a man's lungs. The glare closed in and beat upon him like a white-hot sea.

He needed movement—walking, crawling, even hollering—to keep him from becoming crazed by the heat and the silence. He wanted water more than he had ever wanted anything in his whole life. But movement would cost him, and he would need the water later. So he sat there motionless, waiting, enduring.

He had seen this desert once at sunup and he had a fair idea that the lava strip was about a mile and a half out from the west wall. A mile and a half was more than a fresh and watered man could go without visibility, through rolling sands and afoot, without turning on himself. There'd be no visibility here until sundown. Carnwright fastened his bandanna around his forehead to protect his eyes and closed them.

Maybe he dozed, but it was not like sleep. There was no rest, no lessening of weariness, in dozing. The heat got inside his head and smoldered. It set up a little circle of low, colored flames that he could count. It changed its pattern from time to time, forming geometric figures, but it always came back to a circle, and he would wait for this and tally the flame, just as he might tally a herd. Once the number of flames was different, and he jerked his hazing senses sharply around and recounted. The number was as it should be, and he breathed easier. In this situation, there was no latitude for error anywhere.

The intensity of the day's high sun began to slacken. The glare softened into softer shades of white, then chrome yellow. Gradually that died, and the haze was filled with pastel hues. He began a series of trivial but calculated movements to ease and test himself. He would stretch a single muscle, slowly, so as not to strain it, if it were stiff with burn, or crack the scorched flesh that covered it.

He scooped the sand covering off the hole beside him and got out a slab of bacon. He wiped his feet meticulously clean with his shirt tail, then rubbed the bacon rind over them. For all the smarting, he worked the grease thoroughly into the skin. He allowed himself the smallest sip of water, holding it in his mouth until it was soaked up by his tongue. It did his burning thirst little good, but it got the saliva running. He let himself take a small chew of tobacco then, and no brandy had ever been quicker in the fresh strength the stimulant shot through him.

Heat still hung over the desert in throttling, airless layers. But the sun's rays were slanted; the direct, scorching burn had passed. This was like drought heat, leaching, nerve-jangling, but simply arid. It no longer fried a man. He swung his back to the west and in the faint shadow of his body examined the contents of his saddlebags and pockets.

There were coffee beans, some real beans, a piece of jerky wrapped in a piece of old newspaper and—a full container of salt. Praise the Lord for that! He licked a little from his hand, and his body quickly absorbed it. In minutes, there was not a taste of it left in his quid of tobacco.

He had a book of old fishhooks, one rather big one he had used on salmon. He had a two-hundred-foot spool of pure silk fishline, a few gut leaders, still well-oiled. Near the bottom there was a weatherproof container of matches and two old .44 bullets. There was a rawhide thong about four feet long, six rusty spikes, an old steel horse bit that was worn through at one ring hole. He had a can of milk, a can of soup, and a can of something unknown, probably hash.

They had left him his jackknife with its corkscrew and punch, and he had his gunbelt, although they had stripped it of gun and holster and bullets. He had half a sack of tobacco and some papers and more matches, a half plug of chewing tobacco and three barn staples. He found some coins and receipts and a blank notebook.

They had taken his pencil, but a man could write with a bullet.

As soon as that thought crossed his mind, he snorted at himself. A bullet in the head was the only way a range lord should write off an insult such as this! He tossed the notebook away. If he died, there'd be no clue as to how this came about. Not that he expected to die, but keeping the notebook might give rise to a weakness that would plague him at some tense moment.

CHAPTER II

A Man Humbled

THE flaming, orange-brown haze drew off across the desert like an outgoing tide. The land was breathing off day's soaked-up heat in great, pulsing waves. But there was still a lot of heat in those sands; they wouldn't begin to cool for hours. Carnwright bit down his impatience and used up a few moments by cutting the buttons off his vest. He never used them anyway and while he was clawing up that rock face, they might catch and bring about disaster.

He felt his throat getting alarmingly raw and took another lick of salt and a sip of water. Salt was the big answer to a country's overwhelming heat. Men knew it where their cattle were concerned, but they didn't have that much sense about themselves.

Now the horizon began to come clear behind the dancing screen of heat. Flat desert contours changed into contours of three dimensions and colors. He faced

west again, feeling a little drowsy with the effort of his thinking, and permitted himself a short nap.

When he opened his burning eyes, his mind was still heat-hazed, but in a few moments he became conscious of the desert's strange and sinister quiet. It was sharp enough to stir a man's instincts of alarm and rouse him fully as to where he was. The red-hot sun was burning a hole through the molten, brassy sky. Through the thin haze that was drifting westward, the wall stood reasonably clear now, even though it danced upon his vision.

Carnwright studied the rim line, which was clear enough; he spotted the dip where the rim was lowest. It would be a man's instinct to make his try at that spot. But the slanting rays of the setting sun struck the edge of the rim and glinted at that point. That meant bare rimrock, rounded and wind-polished like a stone column. It would be a hell of a thing to get way up there and then find no way of clawing over the top.

He discarded that possibility with regret. His strained and red-rimmed eyes combed back and forth, searching for a line of oblique shadow and finding none. There were two perpendicular shadows, though, high up and widening at the rim. They might offer a means of reaching the topside if a man could get to them. At those points the bluff was approximately four hundred feet high, he judged.

Carefully he wiped his feet free of sand and grit and thoroughly swabbed out the inside of his boots. He'd been wearing English field boots instead of his usual high-heeled Spanish ones, and he thanked his stars for that. He would be able to walk in these without crippling himself. Maybe he could even climb.

He loaded his belongings into the saddlebags and balanced the yoke over one shoulder. He toted the canteen on the other. It was not much of a load, not one-fifth the weight he had toted over many a high mountain, but after two hundred yards it felt like lead. He had to fight off heat exhaustion.

The sun had already dropped when he reached the barrier and shadows were thick and blue upon the wall. But there was light overhead, and real dusk would not come for near an hour. His whole body was crying for rest, but he drove himself on.

The low, eroded footrock was level on top, and he had cached his load beside a peculiarly shaped boulder, inside twenty minutes. Not daring to sprawl out, he hunkered to relax. He took his first real drink of the day, and never had water tasted sweeter, for all that it was metallic and still hot.

HE HAD marked the shadow streaks in his mind as he approached and now he moved rapidly along the face of the cliff until he could see a V of light cut into the dark line of the rim. The cliff here was rough, solid rough, and of a peculiar formation. It was filled with short narrow cracks and poke holes no bigger than a finger. Almost evenly spaced, small wedges cropped out from the wall, some three inches wide, none over two inches. The spaces between were smooth as lava, but it was not lava; it was softer than the outcrops, yet harder than sandstone.

Carnwright took special note of these details, for upon them might hang his fate. At the bottom, this rock looked easy to climb. But if handholds gave out and it turned out that the wall was composed of that smooth stuff between the holes and the outcrops, traversing it would be impossible. In any case, the smooth part would reflect the daytime heat and light at him like polished metal.

The second V was perhaps a mile down the footrock, and the wall was formed of veins of hard sandstone and hard-packed clay dirt. It did not have the reflecting properties of hard rock, and a climber could dig out steps and handholds. But there would be danger of a hold crumbling under the pressure of weight and movement.

The matter of decision was urgent as he moved back for his cache. One man had

climbed out of here alive, so another could. But there had been *only one* to his knowledge, and he knew, too, that the desert floor was strewn with the bleached skeletons of those who had failed. The thought was depressing and he felt worry fluttering against his nerves as a moth flutters against a window.

That was not the way of a range lord, and he bridled at it. A range lord's way was cool calculation and calm judgment. "Sleep on it," he mumbled to himself. It was a cliché, simply something to say, as much as anything to break the unending monotony of the desert's timeless silence.

But that was the answer, and it made him feel easier. Back as his cache, he pulled off his boots and stretched out. By comparison with the day's throbbing heat, the dusk already seemed cool. He slept, not caring how long he slept, and since he had put off making a decision, he slept soundly.

He awakened in the dark, expectant hush that comes before first dawn. Always the world was quiet at this hour, but the eternal, dead silence of the desert was a force with power like the impact of a tornado's shrieking sound. It created a fear that a man had to fight and made him watch himself so that he did not keep glancing over his shoulder.

Carnwright frowned and thought: No. Nothing in God's green world has ever been tough enough to scare me!

BUT this wasn't God's green world. This was Hell Hole. And he *was* scared. He controlled it, yet at the instant of waking, he had felt fear.

It made him remember something his father had once said—and come to think of it, his father would not have been in this jam. When his father went after rustlers or on venegance, he had traveled with an army until his objective was achieved. Carnwright had been above using a bodyguard when he went to town on business, and that was why the outlaws he was warring against on the range had been able to seize him.

What his father had said was: "No man is born so big but what something bigger exists to humble him. And no man grows so big but what he does not occasionally need humbling."

Well, Carnwright admitted, this pervading silence humbled him. The wall was something he could see and feel and get his hands on; he could lick it. But the silence was something he couldn't see, couldn't understand; yet he could feel it. Now, for the first time in his life, he conceded that other people might have feelings he could not see and did not understand. Yet if their feelings were as important to them as his feelings were to him, they were entitled to consideration.

The moment of philosophical introspection did not soften him but it tempered him. There would be some changes on the range when he got back. There was that Pot Sink water hole he was holding for no reason, except that it was his graze. McClellan had asked for it decently and McClellan needed it. Why McClellan had to herd in that particular spot was one of the things Carnwright didn't understand. Perhaps it was because it had been the site of McClellan's father's first camp. Carnwright had always sneered at sentiment, but then, he had always sneered at fear until now.

He shook off his fright, dismissed his idle thoughts. He took his first drink of the day, located some withered brush and kicked the dried roots loose and broke enough twigs for a small fire.

He cooked the salt bacon and warmed the hash. He munched a few bitter coffee beans and dropped the rest in his pocket. The dried beans he put in another. Then he rolled a smoke and hunkered there, savoring the tobacco flavor while real dawn fanned up beyond the lava hills.

Of the two possible ways he had seen up the wall, he would have bet his last dollar that the old desert rat had chosen the clay wall. But the desert rat must have had a toll which Carnwright did not have to hack out holds where he needed them. Climbing the rock wall

would be harder and slower, but surer.

"And I surer than hell mean to get out of here," Carnwright muttered grimly.

He set his mind, then, on the rock wall. It would shadow early, and shadowed rock was tricky stuff when you were so close you could not get perspective. He had climbed in rocky country after bighorn, but he had never climbed anything like this sheer wall. He had no idea how long it would take him, even if his course were uninterrupted by dead ends and he was able to hold a reasonably true course.

"What happens," he asked himself, "if I get caught on the wall by nightfall?"

Clearly, no man could hang onto a precarious hold all night through, and he would be a fool to move. He might find a crevice where he could jam that old horse bit and belt himself to the wall. That would support his weight all right, but morning would find him without the strength to move. Then he looked at his saddlebags. They could be made to serve as a kind of sling seat if he could find a way to fasten them.

CHAPTER III

Beginning the Climb

DAWN'S cold blue-white light was smudging now with streaked yellowish crimson. The desert had cooled some overnight, but the same burned-out airs still hung over it. Carnwright stowed his belongings carefully and moved to his chosen place.

He thought out his climb in detail. Even a few feet out from the base of the wall, he could not see the V at the top. He might miss it all together and still reach the top and not be able to get over. He found some rocks he could move easily and built two cairns to mark the border of the fissure. That done, he cut the pockets off his saddlebags and tested the pull of his fishline. A rope would have been better, but the outlaws had not left him that. He braided a short one from the fishline and measured the remainer. One hundred feet. It meant that he could travel by fifty-foot stretches without toting the awkward weight of his canteen and improvised sling-seat. The double line was amply strong to lift that weight.

He took a last drink, filled his mouth with salt and formed a heavy brine before swallowing it. It almost came up, and he locked his jaws and kept swallowing fast until the nausea passed.

Finally, he made the fishline fast to his belt and looked dubiously at the big patches of leather that had been the pockets of the saddlebag. He could think of nothing he could use them for, but nevertheless he fixed the pieces flat against his body under his belt.

Then he studied the wall once more while he had a last smoke. When he grounded out the butt, he nodded once, as if in signal, and moved in his attack upon the precipice.

The first fifty feet were fairly easy, once he had accustomed himself to the awkward balance of flat climbing. He had one skid, and learned the importance of finding solid position before reaching for another handhold.

His fishline was drawing taut, which was the only thing that stopped him. At that instant he felt that he could keep right on and be over the top by noon. The exertion had loosened him and given him a store of self-assurance. Weariness had not yet begun to set in or fray his nerves.

He thought of the outlaws again. "The damned fools! Expecting to coop *me* up in that hole!" he muttered arrogantly.

HE TWISTED and looked down under his arm, and the shift of weight almost ripped him from the wall. He clung by his finger tips and somehow kept his toes on their narrow hold.

Death's chill turned his heavy burn faint and grayish. Feelings he had never known in the wildest fury of a stampede made his heart pound and his throat constrict. He had to fight against loosening

his grip. He had to fight off panic.

Then he regained his self-control. Through some unfathomable process of will he worked himself slowly back into balance, flat against the wall, and clung there with his legs quivering so that his knees knocked against the stone.

The wall above him still looked fairly easy, and he felt an almost irresistible impulse to cast loose the fishline with its precious load and just keep on climbing.

He took a new handhold and shifted his weight carefully to relax his strained and quivering legs. He fought down his wild impulse to let go and became coldly realistic. He would need the water and sling-seat. But another carelessness like that and he wouldn't need anything!

Reaching carefully into his pocket, he popped some coffee beans into his mouth along with a chew of tobacco. The bitter mixture steadied his heart and sent fresh strength to his nerve centers. He had to figure out how to raise that weight without shifting his own balance. It was not going to be easy, unless he could find a cleft or outjutting where he could anchor himself securely.

He did find a small crack where he could jam the old horse bit and draw his fishline over it like a windlass—but it was not large enough. He had to work it larger with his knife and leather punch, a laborious chore that strained him to the core. He got it finally, put the knife away and clung there gasping. He felt that if he didn't get out of that position soon, he was going to fall.

It took him a long time to relax his taut nerves and jerking muscles. The sun had grown hot upon his back, and now he noticed that it was heating up the rock. He wondered just how much the rock would heat up and if a man could stand it and still control his muscles. Then he recognized the worry for what it was and crushed it down. Worry was for the herd. The herd masters faced facts and made the best of their situations. And by thunder, he was still alive, was still lord of the range, including Hell Hole!

He fished out a spike and drove it deep but loosely into a crack at his right. Then he put the fishline over the smooth horse bit above him and drew his load up between his legs. The weight served to hold him against the wall as long as he controlled the movement of his down pull. At intervals, his arm would feel the strain, and he would hold his load with a half hitch on the nail.

When the load was close below his feet, he made the line fast to the spike and prayed. He hooked a half hitch in the line below with one boot, slacked the line off the horse bit and swung the load with his foot and tipped it loose.

It swung from the spike. When it settled, he was able to work the canteen up and take a badly needed drink.

He had been here at this fifty-foot height for over an hour. He had used too much energy and had come near death. He desperately needed a change of position and rest, but nowhere within his vision was there a decent ridge or cleft. Then he remembered his extra belt, his gunbelt, and damned himself for a fool. He could have hooked it onto the horse bit and into his pants buckle all through this and been comparatively free to move.

After adjusting it, he was able to shift his weight and relax, but he had lost more valuable time and energy. The rocks were hot, even to his rope-calloused hands, and the sun was burning his shoulders clean through his shirt and vest. The small of his back was protected by those pieces of leather he had almost junked. He gave a rough but earnest prayer of thanks for them.

THE ROCKS he had piled below to give him his true line of climb were now indistinguishable in the shadowless, hot landscape. This condition would exist until evening's softer, slanted light. He could not wander in circles, but he could go as far off trail on a rock wall as in desert sand dunes.

He was using the old horse bit now almost constantly, but it was treacherous. It would seem to be fixed solid, then the

drag of his weight would turn it. Once, he drove it in a crack too hard and had hell's own time working it out. He reached the hundred-foot level and had difficulty unsnagging his tote load from its catch. When it did swing free, the line snapped out of his hand and slapped a raw welt across his face.

Ducking his head into his shoulder to let the line swing back, he looked straight down and found the icy answer to the question: How high is high? His instant fear was instinctive and primitive. It had nothing to do with his fear of falling or his worry about the rock. No matter how safely anchored he was, that straight drop through the rising waves of yellow heat would still have tied those same knots in his stomach.

It was an effort to tear his gaze from that spellbinding drop and raise his head. His heart was thumping a wild tattoo, and there was sweat on his forehead.

After some minutes, he dragged his tote load up, and it came up hard. He knew he was growing weak for want of rest. Hanging by that belt was not enough to ease the now grinding strain. He had to have real rest soon, but there was no gouge, no slightest ledge of any account, that he could see.

But up and over to the left there was a hollow in the wall that showed a dark streak. Only a place the light could not reach would give such a shadow. It was a real crack, a haven, in the wall of Hell Hole!

Laboriously he worked over to it and clawed into the slight hollow and clutched the security of the cleft with a deep gratitude. Every muscle in his body was quivering. The front of his shirt and pants were shredded. His eyes were burning as though scorched, and his calloused hands felt glued to hot running irons.

There was no ledge, no floor, in this shallow hole. But there was a sharp angle into which he could crowd almost half his body, and there was a tilt to the side of the hollow so that he could rest his other hip and shoulder.

The sun beat in here like the fires of hell, and the hollow was not so shallow but what it formed a pocket to hold the most burned of lifeless airs. But it was safety, a chance to close his tingling eyes and catch his breath. No bed had ever felt so comfortable. No forted rancheria had ever offered such security. With his saddlebags and water there, he would have felt in luxury.

Swinging that load over to him presented too great a risk. He had to content himself with the arrangement he could make of his belts. He wedged the horse bit securely with the staples and held himself safely in his position with a full sling, even if he turned.

He got himself fixed securely in place, then knifed open the tin of milk and scooped out half. He built a smoke and savored its invigorating flavor fully with a careless leisure that was almost indolence. He cocked his hat against the sun, closed his eyes and slept.

CHAPTER IV

Suspended in Space

WHEN he wakened, he estimated that it was about four o'clock. One whole side of his body felt frizzled with sunburn, raw and sore from his feet to the top of his head. But he was rested, or at least the tension was gone, his nerves had quieted and his muscles no longer twitched. He had lost that terrible feeling of utter strengthlessness.

Writhing waves of heat came up from the desert floor. The sun blasted out of a curdled copper sky. But the glare was beginning to soften. It was possible to look into it through narrowed lids with crying. He could even look at the rock without his eyeballs getting scorched.

He finished the milk but, after consideration, kept the soup in reserve. He gnawed a small piece of tough bone-dry jerky, munched some dried beans and finished off by chewing coffee. He felt parched for a real spree on water, but he

was well-fed, and his brain was clear.

He tested his body, stretching every muscle he could without endangering himself. Another smoke gave him a sense of invigoration. He rubbed his sore, blistered feet with the bacon rind and smeared some of the grease on his elbows and neck.

"I bet that desert rat never bothered with all this," he grunted. But he wasn't a desert rat, he was a range lord and he meant to get out of here and prove it.

Butter-fingered, he lost a staple while unfastening himself and realized that he would have to be more careful. He began working up obliquely to reach his original line of climb. He had, he guessed, three hours of true light left, and there would be another hour of shadow light after that before actual sundown.

The rock burned his hands, but at least it would get no hotter, and he was developing a kind of immunity to the burn. It was going to take weeks, maybe months, to grow new flesh, but right now the pain was dull. Worse than anything else were the upblasts of dead heat and the airs so burned out that each breath was like a knife through his lungs.

He made another haul and anchoring of his tote load. It was an exertion, and he welcomed it with wicked satisfaction. Each lift meant progress. It was a tribute to the qualities that made him Carnwright.

BY THE END of true light the rocks were cooling. But he was tiring. Not nervous fatigue, not the exhaustion from fear that he'd felt before. This was the natural weariness of a man who has pushed himself overlong.

High overhead—high as the violent red and brown and yellow sky—there was a bulge in the wall and a jagged-edged V in the middle of it. Carnwright studied it while he rested. He was familiar enough with his job now so that he could dare to lean back in his belts for a better look.

"Nice place to hang in for a night," he told himself, but he did not smile, and the line of his mouth was grim.

Nice or not, there was no other place. He freed his belts and began to climb, saving strength whenever he could but still having to drive his flagging body. His reflexes were becoming uncertain, and he felt increasingly wobbly.

Ten feet below the outcrop, he had to stop and bring up his tote load. Anger gave him strength, but even so, it took precious minutes of daylight. He had wanted to climb abreast of the outcrop before the light failed and see if there were any kind of flatness or niche or ledge above. Now he could not.

He spiked his load and did not even pause to drink. If his laborious movements of reaching and testing and moving a few inches at a time could be called scurrying, he scurried. The shadows were heavy under the swell, but it was shallow and let in enough light to catch the edges of the inverted V. Carnwright grunted with thankfulness to find that, though rough and jagged, the stone was solid enough to bear his weight.

He had to peg himself to the wall with a staple this time, since he needed the bit for what he meant to do. He tried not to think of that precarious staple as he wedged the bit into a narrow crack. Inserting the bit near the top of the wedge, he felt with it, and then his heart seemed to twist and his breath congeal. There was a little fix on the two sides of that triangle that might catch and hold the bit firm, but the bit was too long.

Swearing violently, half crazily, he rammed the bit upward. The belt staple was jerked loose by the abrupt movement. One knee banged hard against the rock, and his back arched out with the change in pressure. At the same instant the bit jumped upward.

He knew all that, knew he was falling, and instinctively gripped the bit harder. It held!

He realized, then, that his angry upward thrust had caused the bit to break so that it could fit into the niches. Much as he needed a blow, he couldn't stop. The shadows were thickening fast. Again he made his gun belt secure to the bar and

matched it with the belt to his pants. It crossed his mind irrelevantly that with tight range pants, a belt was not really necessary, yet no man ever went without one.

In a moment he had found a place to lodge a spike and drove it down solidly. Then he dragged loose his pegged tote and braced himself for the cross swing. While it was still swinging, he looped the rope hurriedly and loosed the old saddlebags. Working in real shadows, his weight shifting dangerously, he cut triple slashes in each side. He ran his belt through these slashes and joined the ends with the rawhide thong, around which he twisted the old gut fishing leaders. He hung his canteen on the nail and found that his short, braided rope would reach through the slashes to the bit bar and leave about six feet over.

He put his full weight on the bit then and tested its seating, knowing he would plummet down if it tore loose. But it held, and with a terrific effort he pulled himself up into his sling-seat.

It was a hell of a position, but he had got the sling fixed so that it could not bucket under him, unless his legs suddenly flexed straight during the night. Now he looked down into the deepening shadows of the desert and caught the impact of suspension in space. He was damned glad he had had not time for thought during his maneuver.

Then a welcome flash of humor came to soothe his nerves and restore his mental balance. A picture formed in his mind of how he would look to a bunch of ranchers if they were to suddenly appear below and see him suspended almost two hundred feet over nothing. What a scrawny, crazy object he would be to them.

Dusk settled over the desert, heavy and hot, as sundown gave way before it. Heat still shimmered up, making the pale light of the stars shiver and dance.

Carnwright realized suddenly that he hadn't had his ration of water, and he reached for the canteen carefully. He had his full draught and enjoyed it the more because he could take his time to savor its refreshing quality. Then he knifed open the soup and ate the thick stuff with his knife. He loaded the last half with salt, mixed a little water with it, and chewed a few dried beans. He had another, full but careful drink of water and chewed half the remaining coffee beans. While relaxing with a smoke, he reviewed the day's progress.

CHAPTER V

Go On!

BY DAWN he was unable to find anything but grimness in his situation. He ached in every muscle from the effort of maintaining his balance all through the night; and although fresh air had flowed down to him, the rope he had looped around his chest had made breathing difficult.

He felt sore and beaten, as he imagined a man must feel after being rope-dragged. His feet must be solid blisters, and his joints felt as if he'd been on the rack. Worst of all, his brain was clogged, his thinking hazy. Perhaps he was beginning to crack up. He had to force himself to look down for his markers. He was a good thirty feet off course. But there was a compensation. He was a good deal higher than he'd figured. He must have forgotten one water-lift.

He munched the last of his beans and coffee, then had a good drink and a smoke, with a chew of tobacco to top it off. But this morning, these were purely necessary actions. Grim realism gripped him. His hours were numbered. He'd started fresh and had had good luck, and was probably not more than halfway up. Now his supplies were gone and his water soon would be, and he was beginning to cripple up. He doubted if he could last another night out, even if he found a ledge to sleep on. He knew he would not have the strength for such an effort as he had made last night.

That meant he had to go straight

through the high glare and intense heat of midday—and pray, partner, pray. If he failed to make topside by the last direct light, he was finished, and the outlaw chief had won.

The thought roiled him, put fight scudding through him, whipped some life into his sluggish blood. He cursed softly to himself. No outlaw was going to do that to Carnwright! It was a matter of pride that he get out of here to prove himself. By all that was holy, if they got away with this, no man, or woman, on that whole range would be safe!

He rubbed his sore body and used his belts to hoist himself while he flexed muscles and got blood flowing. Dawn was a brash white wall beyond the horizon when he worked his way out of the sling-seat, leaving the rope loop around him. There was tolerable footing, and he could even exercise a little if he were careful.

DRASTICALLY he shortened his tote line to ten feet and fastened a spike in it at that point. He made a shorter loop runner for it that he could slip over his arm. Instead of hauling each time, he would peg his canteen up as he went.

The fishhooks he used to secure the saddlebag across his blistered shoulders. He put his belt on and found his pants so loose that he could take in two full notches without binding himself. He left the short rope attached to the horse bit but strapped his gun belt around his middle and made the rope fast to it.

It took considerable time to work the bit loose. He was going to miss its sharp prong, yet if it had not broken, he might now be lying dead below.

As soon as it was light enough he worked back to the line of climb. The activity chafed his bruises and broke his blisters. He was climbing desperately now. One step, two steps, three steps . . . hold to the line. Don't stagger, don't circle. Upgrade, downgrade . . . never mind the glare. Just hold your steps even and don't lurch, partner. Stop and bawl that you can't see, can't breathe, can't go on. Curse the devil and the world and kingdom come. Go loco, but *don't lose that line!*

Pin up the damned canteen, even if you can't see. One climb, two climb, three climb . . . stop and bawl at the pain, but *don't let go!*

Get started again, mister. Remember, you're Carnwright!

All day long he talked to himself like that. But all the time he was going up, even when the pain almost made him black out, even when he whimpered in despair, "What's the use?"

Go on, get up! Up, up . . . one climb, two climb, three climb. No more canteen to tote. Don't stop . . . one climb, two climb, three climb . . . damn you, you're the range lord. Go on!

End of day brought quickly changing streaks of color of every hue to the sky, and the clock of eternity ticked on toward the last hour of full light and the limit of Carnwright's endurance.

The time had come for a sane consideration of the situation. He hooked himself fast and forced his senses into order. Leaning back, he looked up.

There was no visible sign of the rim. But farther along the cliff, where it bellied out, he could see the rim, and it looked higher than heaven itself.

He sucked in a deep breath and battled his sinking spirits. Again he looked down through terrifying space to his markers. He was at least fifty feet off his line of climb.

The discovery registered, but for a long time he just stared—without panic, without any real emotion. Even the height had lost its power to terrify. He looked at the stones as if they already marked his grave.

He was finished, his number had run out. He might as well save further grief and pain and effort by jumping instead of waiting to drop because battered muscles could no longer hold.

But he began to climb again, trying, as best he could, to bring himself in line. Keep going . . . damn you, you're still Carnwright!

Well, he thought grimly, he would crawl right into the sundown. He could man-

age that long—unless he happened to slip.

OR HAD he slipped? Nothing but space met his groping left hand. Suddenly it was caught.

He could raise himself a little, enough to see that his wrist had caught in a cleft —the cleft! The cleft was there. The V ran clean over here and was deep enough for a man to crawl through!

Fear gripped him again, a very personal fear of failure. He had reached the cleft, but he would have to work along it ten or twelve feet before it would be wide enough for his body.

Groaning, sobbing, trembling—he no longer had the strength of will to control himself. By the eternal, maybe Hell Hole had him licked, but it would remember him with respect and it would remember that he was Carnwright, range lord!

One last frenzied scramble, and he tumbled into the cleft and bumped his head on the top. It was big enough, and the angle was not so steep that there was danger of sliding out.

The light was dim, and the shadows were forming, but the afterglow of sundown was bright above him. The wedge grew wider, and he feared that is would prove to be a glassy sluiceway. But there was something other than stone—God give him strength and let him give thanks —it was grass he clutched in his bloody hand!

He tumbled out on the sweet smelling grass and lay there sobbing, and then, for a few minutes of eternity, he slept. When he came to, he knew nothing but an intense and fiery thirst. There was no water around here that he knew of, but a man could chew moisture out of the roots of grass—moisture, and bitterness that helped as much. He grubbed and grazed there like a berserk animal.

Long hours later—or was it only minutes?—he stood on the rim of Hell Hole and looked straight down the wall he had conquered. He had great respect for that height but no fear now. He had licked Hell Hole. More, he had licked any uncertainty that might have been in himself, and he would be an easier man to get along with from now on because of it.

He had been born to a name and power, but now, by thunder, he had earned the right to hold them. It was a good feeling, a solid feeling, yet the wine of victory was sobering rather than heady. Three days ago he would have stood there and crowed. He would have gone to town as soon as he could get there to jeer at the outlaws and to proclaim himself. But now—

CHAPTER VI

Rimrock Party

NOW THERE was final chore to do. He had been invited to attend a certain party this night. The outlaws would build their fire somewhere along the cliff, of course. It would be something their brutal humor could not resist, just in case he was crouched down their in terror or writhing in the last agony of thirst.

Carnwright meant to attend that little party, for all his mangled body and his fatigue and pain. For all that he was unarmed, too. He would attend because of a cold and relentless determination, not from any spirit of braggadocio.

First, though, he needed water, and he did not know this part of the range over well. He did know of a wet-season hole, down by two buttes that surged their silent black masses against the starry sky. He lurched and staggered down there like a puppet moved by strings. It was do or die before reaction set in. Once down, he would stay down for weeks, until his blistered, fevered body healed.

Somehow he reached the buttes. The water had petered out. But there was enough mud in the center to soak some of the mounting fever from his burning body. Luckily, he found a tin can in which he made small slashes. Set in the mud, this caught a seep of dirty water, but God, how good it tasted!

In spite of himself, he might have passed out with fatigue had he not caught the flicker of fire up on the rim. It struck him as foolhardy of the outlaws. Then he recalled that probably the fire could be seen from nowhere else because of a ridge that jutted up between the rim and the desolate grazing country.

He pulled the tatters of his clothes over his battered body. That fire had given him an idea. Painfully he moved around the buttes, gathering grass and brush and piling them around some dead oaks. He struck a match and stumbled back before the whooshing flame. He stood there until he was sure the dead oaks had caught.

This side of the buttes could be seen damned near all over, and a standing tree on fire always brought someone to investigate.

He didn't know if he felt better or worse. The mud soak had helped get his fever down and had drawn some of the poison from his wicked sunburn. But reaction might set in at any time. Vitality had almost run out. He'd had a pint of water, and that, at least, had done him good; and he'd sent up a signal that could not be seen from the rim, and that just might bring help.

Before starting back toward the rim, he took lesson from his experience. He stood there, staring toward the fire with narrowed eyes, trying to picture how men like that would act. The fire would be close by the rim for his benefit, in case he might be able to see it from down in Hell Hole. They would probably have lightwood or pitchwood for torches and would drop a few to see if they could locate him in that black hole. Most likely, they would be moving between fire and cliff out of curiosity and would vie with each other in displays of brute humor.

IF THEY had already made their raid on McClellan, they would use this for a branding fire and would be holding the cattle in a small, well known pocket of the rimrocks that rustlers had long used because of its impregnable defenses. If they had not yet made the raid, they would not be so occupied, and he would have to take his chances. In any case, there would be little reason for them to feel the need of guards.

So in his mind he pictured them along the cliff line with the fire behind them. He would have to cross that open space and circle of flickering light before he could confront them.

This was all supposition, but it was damned grim. He fingered the two bullets in his pocket and went back to his own fire. By its light he found a good-sized club of dry lightwood and toting this, started back again.

Brush and grass offered cover almost up to the area lighted by the outlaws' fire. Carnwright's instinct was to lie down and study them a bit. But a man moved off, chuckling, toward the hole in the rimrocks, and soon a different man came from that direction toward the fire. If they already had business on hand, they might tire of their game of taunting him and turn to activity, and he'd have no chance.

Standing in the shadows, Carnwright took in the situation. The whole outfit was lined on the rim of Hell Hole, some sitting, some standing. One man was holding a torch out over the hole. At a command from the chief, he swung it wildly and sent it flaming out over the pit. The others were silent until, after a space, the chief called down, "Ain'tcha coming to our little party, dearie? We're having just the most nicest time you can imagine!"

All his men rocked with laughter and mimicked him with their own rough humor. The torch heaver returned to the fire and found another flaming brand.

Carnwright's eyes flamed with decision. He took out his two bullets, drew the leads out with his teeth, and carefully poured the loose powder on his own brand. Then he moved toward the fire, as if he were one of the outlaw band, and hunkered down. The outer flames soon put a good fire on his brand. He thought one of the men looked at him, which might have been, but since nothing hap-

pened, he thought the man had decided he was one of them.

The flame grew on his brand. He watched intently. Everything now depended upon it. When it was right, he stood up and moved toward the line of men. The chief had just called down another of his uproarious remarks.

In a screech that sounded like the gates of hell because his throat was so cracked and raw, Carnwright said, "Why, I'm already enjoying the party!"

The outlaw froze, then pivoted and stared. The figure he saw couldn't be real. He breathed hoarsely, "Carnwright? Hell, that ain't you!"

"Oh, yes," Carnwright croaked. "Me—range lord!"

He twisted his brand a little. The flames licked up and touched the powder. The powder flared, and the whole big tip exploded into flame. Above it the outlaw leader could see Carnwright's eyes—deep, sunken pools in a mask of horribly raw, fatigue-ravaged, burned flesh.

"And now—" Carnwright grated and started toward the chief with the flaming torch extended.

The outlaw gave a blast of breath, half curse, half panic, and his hand flashed toward his gun. But as he stepped back a pace for better balance, he struck a rounded shoulder of the rim and started to topple. Instinctively he threw out his arms. He caught Slateye on one side, but there was no one on the other. His weight half swung around, and for an instant he was safe.

SLATEYE had countered the drag with an involuntary shifting of balance. Then he looked down into the face of his boss. He sneered and spat in his face and knocked the clutching hand loose. For one brief instant, the chief seemed suspended flat on his back in air, then he vanished into the inky shadow of Hell Hole with a guttural shriek.

"Yellow bastard, trying to throw me to save himself!" Slateye rasped, looking down the line of men. "Well, that's that. I reckon you know who to call boss now—or is there some argument?"

There were quick mutterings of agreement. Whatever they might do to him later, they would not breast him now. What he had done had put at least a temporary fear in them.

Then Slateye turned his gaze on Carnwright, and a cruel smile played around his brutal mouth.

"Why, Carnwright," he said, mimicking the humor of the man he had lately called boss, "you're kind of burned out, but you ain't proper roasted yet. What you need is more cooking in a lower fire."

He threw back his head and filled the night with howling laughter, and Carnwright lurched forward and rammed the firebrand into his mouth. The man's arms went out as he staggered back, grabbing crazily for the brand. He tore it loose just as his crazed movements put him over the rim. Clutching the brand, as though frozen to it, he plummeted from sight with a sobbing scream of terror.

There was dead silence for a moment, then one of the hard-case hombres grunted, "Lighted his own way clean into hell for sure, didn't he?"

Another one laughed and rasped, "Well, that gives us all quite a little more money, don't it? Dunno but what we ain't made more here on the rim than we'd made taking double the cows and sweating ourselves silly doing it." Then he looked around at the rancher, his expression completely indifferent. "But we still got to do what they started to do about this gent. . . . Carnwright, I can't think of no better place for you than right back where you started!"

He drew his gun and started to move so that Carnwright would be between him and the rim.

A carbine barked from the darkness. The outlaw's knees, his body arced. He held that way for a moment, a man struck dead in the act of dealing out death. Then he pitched forward and his weight slowly pulled him over the rim.

The rest of the outfit seemed to be waiting for a chief's command that did not come. Then one of them yelled hoarse-

ly, "Get out of the light!" and the whole bunch broke for shadows like a covey of quail.

Carnwright sank in his tracks, going to his knees in an attitude of prayer. It was unconscious, but he was a grateful man, and it took no humility to mumble a short, awkward prayer, even though gunfire was crackling and there was a lot of running and cursing all around him.

He was still kneeling when McClellan came over to him and said in a voice that held bitterness because of past wrongs, yet was respectful, "Carnwright, your fire signal has saved me the best of my brood stock. I reckon we have no more argument about that Pot Sink hole."

"None whatever," Carnwright answered in a rusty speech. "I am moving my fence back of there tomorrow. It's yours. You're welcome to it."

The unexpected answer baffled McClellan. He stooped to peer at the man who spoke in that cracked, croaking voice. He gasped at what he saw, then straightened and bawled into the night:

"Boys, you want to see a real he-man in the raw? Come here and build up that fire."

A range crowd gathered quickly, and somebody kicked together the fire and threw on more wood. They just stared with downright disbelief, cutting pretty true sign of the story from what they'd seen and what they were seeing.

Then McClellan motioned the murmuring crowd to silence and gave an order. "Somebody get water and whiskey and blankets—for Carnwright, the range lord." ● ● ●

THE UNSEEN NEIGHBOR

A RANCHER might have a neighboring nester who would occasionally "mistake" one of the rancher's calves for a jack rabbit, particularly if the nester had a big family to feed. But most old-time ranchers who had a heart would not go too deeply into the question of the poor hunter's eyesight if the rancher thought the meat was keeping a family of poor youngsters alive. Such mistakes didn't cost the rancher too much in the long run.

But the rancher had another neighbor who was a lot more expensive, one that he seldom saw unless he went to great pains to meet him. That was the wolf. According to official estimates, a single wolf will destroy an average of a thousand dollars' worth of livestock, killing calves, and even colts. One government trapper reported a case of a single wolf killing twenty head of livestock in one night.

And wolves are still with us. This writer lives on the edge of a small town in Oklahoma, and he can hear wolves howling as he writes these facts. A next door neighbor, with houses on both sides of him, killed a wolf in his own chicken yard within the last few weeks, within rifle shot of my typewriter.

Farther away from settlements, wolves run in packs, and will very definitely attack a lone man in the woods or on the prairie.

Dogs often stray from farms or ranches and join wolf packs, and will interbreed with them. A wolf that is half dog is a more vicious animal than a full-blooded wolf.

A government trapper in Texas was called out to capture a wolf which had been preying on his livestock. The animal was particularly wise in escaping the traps for a long time, but finally the trapper got him. He was a full-blooded police dog—and he wore a collar that a former master had put on him!

On another occasion, when this trapper caught a dog that had been killing a rancher's calves, he caught the rancher's own dog! The dog had been running with a wolf pack at night, and then coming home and sleeping on the porch all day. The rancher had been wondering why the dog slept so much in the daytime, and wasn't hungry for the food that was set out for him.

It cost him quite a bit of money to get his answer.

—Jack Benton

WANNA BUY A RANCH?

THE cattle business was built on the fact that range grass was free for whoever got on it and could hold it. Of course, that was a long time ago. In some instances a man with a horse, a rope, and a branding iron was in the cattle business. But it takes more than a rope and a branding iron to go into ranching today if you happen to want to make your start from taw.

Let's have a look at some of the opportunities as advertised in one of the ranchers' magazines:

Here is a little place of 13,000 acres down in Texas that can be had for $45 an acre, if you happen to have $585,000.00 loose in your Levis. That's Texas, and things are naturally big there, but did you know that they ranched in Alabama? Well, here's a little 4,000 acre patch of ground that you can have for $100 an acre —a matter of $400,000.

Do you like ranching on the prairies of Nebraska? Well, here's a little place of 5920 acres in the Sand Hills section, with seven windmills on it, which you can buy for $150,000.

Or maybe you don't want to be crowded. Then try this 1700-acre ranch in northwest Colorado for only $52,500— and only five miles from town.

Here's another in Colorado. They don't quote a price and you may be able to figure out why. The description details include the following: One of the most scenic and highly improved ranches in the Colorado Springs area. 2,000 acres of the finest grass, hay and timbered. Watered with eight springs and two windmills. Fenced into eight separate pastures; altitude 7000 feet. (Nice cool sleeping on hot summer nights.) Also, "main dwelling is bungalow type with ten rooms, four bathrooms and four fireplaces, all completely modern."

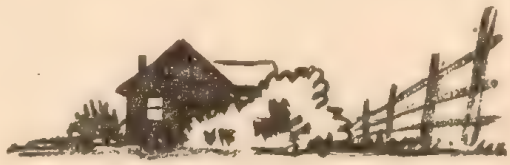
Also there is a servants' house and eight-car garage, which is separate from the usual outbuildings. These so-called outbuildings consist of two large concrete barns, a machine shed, one eight-room duplex, and one six-room modern house. There are also corrals, sheds in the feed lots, etc.

This setup is only fifteen miles from town. The ad says that if you're interested in buying a "small" ranch, inquire about this one. Some young ranny with half a dozen cows and a saddle horse might want to write in and find out how much they want for that place.

Maybe you'd like to settle in New Mexico. If so, you may like the sound of some of these: "Runs 100 head, 3 permanent wells, year-round spring, modern adobe headquarters, best little ranch in New Mexico. Price, $55,000." Try that if you want a "little" place.

Or this one: "52 sections (that's 33,280 acres), runs 280 head, price $90,000."

If you prefer Wyoming, here's a 14,000 acre place plus a 6000-acre state grazing lease only thirty-five miles from town



and which you can pick up for the bargain price of $275,000.

Here's another one of 4,000 acres at $400,000, half cash.

So it goes. A young man can find plenty of ranch property, but he can't go in business with a rope and a branding iron these days.

—Jackson Cole

Smith killed his partner, Larsen, for his gold, but there was something else he wanted a lot more—Larsen's woman!

TROUBLE IN THE NORTH

A Novelet By TOM ROAN

CHAPTER I

The Chain

IT CAME again, a sharp, barking cry that became a thin, eerie whine. It rose in the north and reached through the still white silence that seemed to hug the forest floor. It climbed up and up, growing sharper, fiercer until it became a savage wail. Always, at its topmost note, it held shrill, terribly lone and sad. Then it suddenly pitched downward and rolled away in a hungry lament, its whispery echoes perishing in the cold silence of the Far North night.

"They know." The pretty little Indian girl nodded. Her eyes, big, shining black pools, stared across the camp fire, past the huddled figure of the shaggy-haired white man. "They always know. They are my brothers and sisters out there, for they, too, are children of the North."

"Shut up!" The man on the other side of the fire bared his big yellow teeth at her. "I'm not afraid of the damned things."

Beauty Smith was lying. The harsh jerk in his tone was enough to tell that, but the girl would have known it without the jerk. She smiled at him now, the patience of the ages in her face.

"But they do know." She nodded again. "There has been blood and wrong, a terrible wrong. Even the wolves are joining me in my crying."

"You are not crying, Athka!" he snarled. "Where are your tears?"

"Frozen in the heart I left behind me." She turned her head a little to one side, her coppery skin flawless in the light, a simple, childlike face, yet strong and unafraid. "The wolves know."

"Damn the wolves!"

"They do not often kill men," she went on quietly, "but a great famine lays its heavy hand on the frozen land. And, as I have said, they know what is happening to me, and the terrible thing that happened to my white miner who took me to the Jesuit and made us as one in the manner of the white man. Now he lies still and dead, frozen into ice in the deep gully where you threw his body, the cruel and unsuspected knife driving into his heart from behind. The wolves know all about it."

"If they kill me," he snarled again, "they'll kill you, too!"

"I am already dead." She smiled again, faintly, pityingly. "My heart is gone. It is, as I said, back there in the ice and snow of the gully where his body is lying. Even in death how could he lie there without my heart beside him?"

"You redskin!" he hissed. "You redskin! Wait'll I get you where I want you. I'll teach you things."

"A dead woman in your strong arms?" It looked as if she was about to laugh at him. "What is a dead woman to a strong man? Listen." She raised her hand, and when she spoke again, her voice was still low. "They are calling you."

The wailing was rising again, from east-

They were coming back, those damned things out there in the deep black wall of darkness

ward this time. It was sharper, more long and sad than before, the sound going through Beauty Smith in an icy chill. To keep the girl from seeing the effect it was having upon him he turned and threw another stick of wood on the fire, and the sparks climbed and popped between them.

"You'll learn to love me in time, Athka." He grimaced as the last of the wolf wail quivered through him. "I'll take you places, I'll show you things. I'll put fine clothes on your pretty back. You'll learn to love me if—if an Indian can love."

"An Indian loves deeply." She leaned forward, looking at him intently, something catlike now in her black eyes. "They learned that at the Indian school. White boys found that it was best to leave Indian girls alone. One found the spilled blood of a broken heart on his mother's doorstep."

BEAUTY SMITH lowered his head, avoiding those sharp, bright eyes. He had done a terrible thing. Olaf Larsen had been his friend. Larsen had found him in Fairbanks, broke, hungry and half-sick. Larsen had bought him clothes. He had bought the tools and the grub, and had furnished the sled and the six good black huskies and had led him to the

claim. Larsen's big mistake had been bringing Athka to the cabin to darn their socks, to mend their clothes, to keep the cabin and cook the meals.

A woman's charms had always been Beauty Smith's undoing. He was a brawny, ugly man. His ears were like lumps at the side of his head, and his huge nose was more like a big battered potato. His lower jaw was out-thrust, his protuding yellow teeth too large for any face. Born ugly, prize fighting and brawling about the world for forty years had made such an unwholesome mess of him that nature had stayed her hand, ashamed to go on with it.

Twelve hours ago he had killed Olaf Larsen. There had been no words, no outward hint of the hate and fury that had suddenly possessed him. It had come all at once, as if something had burst and flowed all over him, a rush of madness that overwhelmed him.

Probably Olaf Larsen never knew what happened to him. The ten-inch blade of the knife had gone through him like one blasting stroke of lightning. With only a gasp he had dropped dead on the earthen floor of the lean-to of the low log cabin, his life gushing out of him as the long blade whipped free.

It still amazed Beauty Smith that he had not killed Athka, too. She had always been simple, childlike, her voice gentle even when it came to stopping a fight among the dogs. Small wonder that the big and not too bright Olaf had fallen in love with her and actually married her before bringing her to the cabin. She had been good to Olaf and true to Olaf in every thought and act. There had never been one harsh word between them.

Yet Beauty Smith had faced a tigress in the lean-to when she saw Olaf go down. His knowledge of prize-fighting was the one thing that had saved him. She had torn at him with a knife. Swapping hands on his own knife, he had reached over her blade and clipped her on the jaw. Athka had gone down, half-out, dropping her knife. Coming up, she had rushed him again. The next blow had knocked her out. The moment her eyes cracked open she was up, clawing, scratching, trying to bite him, her hot gasping breath showing her fury. There had been no screaming, no crying and raging such as would have come from a white woman when in a state of high and outraged excitement.

He had struck her down six times altogether. While she was down the last time he had thought of a way to control her. A small but strong steel chain hung on a peg in the wall. It was eighteen feet of it and had a small padlock at each end. Beauty Smith had locked one of it around Athka's right ankle; the other end he had locked loosely around his own waist. When Athka came to her senses, her hands were tied behind her.

"For some reason," he had snarled at her, "I don't want to kill you. I'm taking the gold, the dogs and grub enough for many days on the trail. I might as well take you, you beautiful devil. In fact I want you—more, I guess, than the gold. I'm mad for you, Athka."

She had nodded as her cold, clear thinking came back to her. "Yes, you are mad. I have seen it in your eyes, the way you looked at me. The way you sometimes lick your lips, like a hungry wolf drooling. I told Olaf once. He laughed at my fears. Now he lies dead. The man he befriended has killed him."

"All men die in time, Athka."

"Even as you will die for this." On her feet, her pretty head thrown back, it had looked as if she were about to laugh at him. "That I promise you. It is a vow, as sacred as the vow I gave my Olaf. When you die, I will smile in your face."

He had been a madman, getting ready for the trail. Driving Athka before him, he had caught and harnessed the dogs. Seven moosehide bags of gold had been loaded on the sled. Then had come the grub and furs. On the back of the sled he had hung bundles of rich kindling for quick fires to be started on the trail. On top of the load, he had flung Olaf Larsen's body and had gone back to scrape the earth of the floor and cover the great

pool of blood. Two miles south of the cabin he had dumped Larsen's body off the sled, letting it slide down into a deep gully with loose snow following and covering it. Spring thaws would carry it away, on to the river, and God alone would know what became of it then.

EVEN the dogs seemed to be watching him. There were six of them, lying on the snow in a close quarter circle behind Athka. Two bright eyes marked each dog, accusing eyes with the firelight making them golden slits in the black husky faces. Athka had insisted on feeding them. She had always fed them, and tonight she had seemed deliberately wasteful. Beauty Smith had cursed her and had seen the bristles rise on the dogs as he cursed.

They knew. Yes, the dogs knew. At a word from Athka they might suddenly rise and come lunging for his throat. But Athka was not giving that word. Her dead husband's good six-shooter was in Beauty Smith's waistband. He would snatch it out and start shooting, killing the dogs as they lunged.

In his frenzy he might even kill her this time, and Athka had no mind to die just yet. She was waiting for something, taking her time, thinking, planning inside that Indian skull, and whatever she was planning would bring no good to him. Now and then she would pick up the chain that held them together, rattle it in her hand, study it, weigh it.

Once more she lifted her hand. "They call again. Now from the west. Soon it will come from the south. One by one the band will grow until they make a great circle around us."

"It's only one wolf," he asserted with a leer. "One wolf circling."

"Each wolf," she answered, smiling, "has a voice of its own, as men and women have. You hear and know them in the darkest night. Listen!" She turned her head to one side as the wolf cry in the west fell away and one immediately rose to southward. "Another singer comes to join the great choir. They know. All the forest knows. From other men you might hide an evil deed. The Great North knows all, sees all, hears everything. It is like God looking down. All of it is God. It is the work of God. No man can change it. The hand of doom is on your brow, and no one—" she laughed softly—"knows that better than Beauty Smith."

"I'll kill you yet, Athka!" His body quivered with anger.

"In time, perhaps." She smiled on. "Not now. Not for many days. I manage the sled, I cut the wood, and you watch me closely to see that I do not put the axe to the chain. You take the axe away when the wood is cut. Then I light the fire and cook the meal. You could not travel without me. The dogs would be on you before you had gone a mile. You are not a good man for the North, Beauty Smith. I cannot yet understand why my Olaf brought you along with him. Listen!" Her head came up. "The circle is filling. The dogs are beginning to worry. I hear their growling behind me. I do not need to look to know their bristles are rising. They look right and left nervously, their ears cocked."

He cursed her and wondered why. She was right. The infernal dogs *were* nervous. All around them a ring seemed to be tightening, slowly, positively. But he was not afraid. No! He roughed back his powerful shoulders with a quick shrug. Wolves howled night after night, sometimes day after day in this blasted country. They were a part of the North. Some men poetically called them the music of the North.

Tonight the firelight was attracting them; that was all. It was drawing, but they would come just so close and no closer. The sound of a shot would send them fleeing. Beauty Smith's right hand stole toward the butt of Olaf Larsen's good six-shooter. Larsen's high-powered rifle lay behind him. Propped against a tree beyond the rifle, far out of reach of Athka on her chain, was the axe. Tomorrow night he, himself, would chop the wood; he'd never let her get her hands on the axe again.

CHAPTER II

On the Trail

HE WAS afraid of her. He had to admit it to himself. For another day or two he would make her keep her distance, would be ready to knock her down at the first uncertain move. In the end—yes, in the end—he would have to kill her. By then he would have all he wanted from her, everything. But he could not let her get near other men. Athka would blab her head off, no matter how warm and cuddling she might get, and her blabbing would put a rope around his neck.

Wolves were wailing all around them. He came to his feet with a surge. "We're turning in. Make your bed under that tree." He pointed a couple of yards to his left of the fire to a small fir that was limbless for six feet above the snow. "No tricks. I'll see to that. Be good to me, Athka, and you'll soon learn that I can be sweet to you. You know I like you, and other women have loved me."

"And if the wolves come in?"

"They won't come in!" he snapped, slapping the butt of the six-shooter. "There's plenty of wood. We'll keep up the fire."

He watched her warily as she spread bearskins and blankets on the snow. When the bed was made, he unlocked the chain from around himself, wound it around the fir, and gave her a push back on the bed. Then he locked the free end of the chain around her second ankle.

"I hate to do it, Athka," he growled, stepping back, "but I'd be a fool to take chances with you."

She had no answer for him. She rolled into her bed, covering herself with a blanket and another bearskin. Turning, he made his bed on the slope of an abrupt little rise on the opposite side of the fire. Rifle and axe beside him, he piled down. In his elevated position he could look across the fire and see every move the girl might make.

"Remember," he called to her, "I'm a light sleeper. I'll not close more than one eye tonight, Athka."

Again she did not answer him. He lay there watching, head pillowed high on the rise, ears filled with the crying and calling of the wild things around him. He saw the dogs stir. One after another they crept toward Athka and dropped down in the snow close to her.

He was never so dead-tired in his life, but he could only doze, rousing with fitful starts every few minutes. He sat up with a jerk from time to time, glaring all around, then reaching forward to put more wood on the fire.

Athka was as still as death in her bed beyond the fire. Three of the big dogs had eased closer until they were sleeping back to back against her. But she was watching him, seeing his every move. He was certain of that. Those smart damn Indians!

There were long spells of silence. Around them the chorus in the outer world of snow and darkness had come to an absolute hush, and the whole land was wrapped in a voiceless spell. Now and then in the hush Beauty Smith heard a faint snapping, once a low crying, and knew it was the bitter cold eating into the very hearts of the trees.

Just before dawn the wailing and crying began to mount into an ominous fury. He sat up with his usual jerk, and saw that the dogs had shot to their feet with bristles lifted and fangs bared. Athka alone did not stir a muscle. Smith had the rifle in his hand. For a few moments he felt that a ring of death was closing in on him. Suddenly the wailing and crying stopped. Silence came again, grim, lone, and breathless.

"Just plain damned bluffers," he told Athka when she was melting snow for tea and getting out the smoked salmon they were to have for breakfast. "Blasted cowards, every wolf that ever walked. They might creep up and kill some stupid Indian, but they know better than to try it on a white man."

Watching her face he saw that it was not sullen. It really amazed him. It was such a placid face, so pretty it was almost sweet. Even his swift knockout blows had left it unmarred, as far as he could see, but then, they had been clean blows, just hard enough to drop her and give her time to get some sense in her pretty little head.

He followed her doggedly on the chain after she had broken camp with him standing back, holding the rifle in the crook of his arm. A gray darkness still covered the land. The sun had gone south for the long winter, and it would be weeks

Three Great Magazines

★ EXCITING WESTERN
★ POPULAR WESTERN
★ MASKED RIDER WESTERN

Read All Three!

yet before it returned. It was a cold, still world under an empty dome of colorless sky, the silence broke now and then by the whine of the sled runners on the hard-packed snow.

AT THE gee-pole of the sled Athka was as good as any man, better than most white men Beauty Smith had seen. She seemed to send the sled up and down the slopes, curve it around the bends. On the steeper pulls, she sometimes sent the long dog whip streaking out, making it crack like a pistol shot in the frosty air, but not once did the whip touch a dog. Smith cursed her when they came to the top of one long slope and she stopped to rest the team on the brink of another drop before them.

"I know my dead Olaf's dogs." She turned those big eyes on him, eyes too big and beautiful, he thought, for an Indian's face. "Break the backs of dogs on the trail, and then—" there was the slightest hint of a smile—"you have broken your own back. You cannot travel without dogs. That much even you should know."

"But—" he kept his distance—"there's no pull on a team going downhill."

"There is always pull, going down or up." This time she smiled. "The dogs must keep weight and swing on the traces to steady the sled."

"Well, don't take all day." He rattled the chain impatiently. Tomorrow he would switch the chain. He decided that when she cracked the long whip and sent the dogs on after their brief rest. Tomorrow he would chain her to the sled. It would be safer for him and easier on them both. If she tried to whip up the dogs and get away from him— Well, Athka was not that foolish. There was the rifle. She knew he was a good shot.

That night was almost the same as the night before. They had gone far off any trail in their southward plunge through the wilderness. The camp here was on better ground, snug inside the western-curving arm of a wall of icy cliffs that reached up for sixty feet above them and shielded them from the blasts of cold air surging out of the north. He cut the wood this time, chopping the lower limbs from the stand of small fir around them and throwing it into a pile as she made the rest of the camp.

When darkness dropped its black wall over the world, the fire was burning brightly and shedding out a wide circle of warmth. Athka had started it, fires being the work of a squaw. She had used a few of the rich splinters they had brought along as a starter. Chunks from a dead snag she had asked him to cut down had furnished the dry wood, and she had piled the green limbs on top. It was a better fire than he could have ever made.

Tonight he was going to try to be careful to avoid any reference to the blood he had shed behind them. Olaf Larsen was dead, and his gold was safe in the bottom of the sled, going to the Outside where gold could mean something to a man who would know how to spend it. To hell with Olaf Larsen! He had no gold now. Best of all he had no woman, no warm Athka to curl in his arms at night on the creaking moosehide bed.

CHAPTER III

Indian Beauty

ATHKA had changed hands. The dead could not return to claim her warmth and charm. She belonged to Beauty Smith! Beauty Smith, bull-chested, strong of arm and loin. What in hell was he waiting for? If the Northwest Mounted Police caught him tomorrow, they could do no more than hang him. Whatever he did from now on would not matter. They could kill him only once, even as Olaf had been killed.

Sitting on the other side of the fire Beauty Smith was studying the girl. He watched her as she bent over. Even her damnable furs could not hide the alluring lines and grace of her body. As she plucked them up and squatted beside the fire they hid less of her, and the notion darted through his head that she was tempting him. That was bad. A man watched an Indian woman when she tempted him. Something was going on inside that Indian skull. She was half white in her thinking after her damnable schooling. She did not dress strictly in the Indian manner, certainly not underneath. Olaf had had something to do with it, probably. The way he had always pawed her had told what Olaf Larsen liked.

Dangerous, this Athka. Damned dangerous. Beauty Smith felt like getting up and kicking her once when she squatted, straight across in front of him, her coppery legs gleaming in the firelight. He sat still instead, pulse quickened, smoky-gray eyes narrowing and widening by turns, the broad nostrils of his nose quivering, lifting, swelling outward and falling, sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly, while deep thoughts clamored hotly inside his skull.

Good looking? Hell, no! Athka Larsen was beautiful, a beauty and nothing short of it, a smooth, coppery prize to kindle light in any real man's eyes and make his heart skip and pound. She had come along with the gold. Athka Larsen was part of the loot. Why, hell yes! And he had long wanted her.

Without Athka in the picture he might never have murdered Olaf Larsen. He could have had a third of the gold if he had waited. He had intended to wait. Three days ago, in the afternoon, he had come up, behind the main room of the cabin. Athka had been bathing herself before a roaring fire, the latches of the doors fastened. He had peeped through a crack in the stretched moose bladder that answered for a pane of glass in the window. He had seen her standing there, all of Athka for once in his life!

He told her about it now, his voice low and husky, his big hands opening and closing. Athka would not look at him. If there was any change in her face, he did not see it. He could not see her face. She kept her head down, her hood of fur pulled forward. She gave no sign that she heard anything he was telling her. He got an idea that maybe she was waiting, like any damned Indian. Maybe she had a knife or something hidden about her, one he had failed to find when he had run his hands over her—twice—after he had knocked her out back there in the cabin.

"That's why I killed Olaf, Athka." He had forgotten his promise to stay away from the subject tonight. "I love you. I want you. In the outer world I'll give you a fine house and fine clothes. The claim was about worked out, anyway. You heard Olaf say that. It was a pocket, only a pocket. The last two weeks of work was not worth the effort.

"I'll make you a lady, Athka." He leaned forward again, a lustful fire burning in his eyes. "I'll take you to far places. I'll put silk and satin on you where silk and satin should be, not moosehide and buckskin, or bearskin. God, how I'll love you! Olaf didn't know anything about loving. He was just a big, dumb damned Swede!"

"I loved my Swede." She looked up, eyes shining, and he knew then that she had not heard half of what he was saying. "He was mine."

He reared to his feet and stamped back and forth in the snow, opening his furs and fanning himself. A dog behind Athka lifted his bristles and gave a low growl as he bared his fangs. Beauty Smith put his hand on the butt of Olaf's six-shooter, then changed his mind.

"Well, all right, all right," he half snarled. "You'll come around in time, but you must know I love you, waiting all this time as it is."

Tomorrow night, probably. Maybe tonight. A bang on the jaw, and why not! Things could have happened last night. They would have happened on the cabin floor if she had not opened her eyes and come up struggling and kicking, scratching and biting. Had things happened last night, she would have had all day to become reconciled to them. Maybe she would have been looking forward to tonight, regardless of how she might sulk on the surface. She could only complain to him.

HE WAS thinking, thinking and planning, planning when they finished the evening meal. Chained now to a tree, Athka got up and fed the dogs. As she came back and squatted at the fire Beauty Smith leaned forward, eyes narrowing, growing big, narrowing again, the wings of that horribly battered and broken nose pulsating. He was just about to start talking to her again when a wolf wail rose to eastward. He stiffened and cursed under his breath.

Maybe the damned wolves were brothers and sisters to this coppery girl of the Far North. Maybe the damned beasts were crying because of the troubles that had befallen her. Indians were queer ducks, strange in so many ways a white man would never understand. There were the Siwash with their infernal totem poles, their fish, their buzzards and eagles and all manner of strange things carved out of wood. Yes, maybe there was some connection here.

Hell, that was a foolish way for a white man to think! He wanted to laugh right out. Another wolf wail rose as if from earth to heaven, and he slumped back, swearing under his breath again and glaring at the girl and the dogs beyond her.

Athka had heard the wailing. Of course she had heard, but she gave no sign of it. Her face was still hidden. There was no slight indication that she might raise her head, or even wanted to. Only the dogs beyond her had cocked their ears and raised their hackles. Two of them had bared their long fangs in the firelight.

But they were coming back, those damned things out there in the deep black wall of darkness. A wail was lifted closer at hand, beyond the bend of the cliffs west of them. Almost immediately an answering wail came from the south, the same lonely, sad, fierce crying of the night before when they had been at their worst.

Beauty Smith opened his mouth to say something but closed it quickly, as a wail, shrill and clear, came out of the north. He saw Athka nod. It was just a nod. She did not bother to even glance at him.

"And now what thoughts are stirring in that Indian head?" He tried to smirk as he spoke.

"The same thoughts that stir in yours." He thought she shrugged. "Will they come in tonight or wait for another night?"

"They won't come in at all!" he snarled. "You know they won't!"

"There is great famine on the land." Her voice was gentle, her eyes staring steadily into the fire. "A great hunger is gnawing at the vitals of the wild things. When one is dying and crying from hunger, whether man or wolf, then desperate and terrible things may be done."

"There's not many of them out there. Four or five, or six at most."

"Who knows?" Her voice was a drone. "Sometimes they run in great, great packs in these regions. My people tell of them coming in clouds and of an entire village they destroyed in the long ago. I, myself, have seen more than a hundred."

"Ah, that's a lie, Athka." He tried to snort at her. "But no matter. Tonight will pass as last night passed. Throw down the beds."

When she rose, he saw how great her

weariness was. For a step or two to the side of the sled she seemed to weave. A pang of pity went through him, but he was quick to brush it aside. One did not get soft with these damned Indians, no matter how pretty one might be. But he had to remember that she had been at the gee-pole all day, pushing, swinging, sawing. The quick kill at the cabin still weighed on her small shoulders, and that in itself would have taken the strength out of a dozen white women. Tomorrow, perhaps, he would not force her to drive the dogs so fast.

Keeping his place, he watched her throw down the beds, and without letup the wolf wails rose and fell in the dark world beyond the circle of firelight. Athka soon had the beds spread on the snow, his bed on one side of the fire, her bed on the other. As she worked, he kept out of her way, watching her closely, resisting an urge to step forward suddenly and throw his arms around her and take things in hand there and then.

"The chain will go around the tree as last night," he told her. "I'd much rather not have to do it, Athka, but you know how it is. When you come to me, when you're all mine, there'll be no chains, nothing at all, just you and me, Athka, smooth and warm and snug together."

"I will be dead when that happens."

"You're a damned fool, Athka!"

"Perhaps," she nodded, "but not fool enough to kill a good man for a few bags of gold that will turn to rope to go around my neck."

"Come to me tonight, Athka." He held out his hands to her. "Come to me. It will help you to forget. Olaf will never come back. Olaf is only a dream. Look upon him as a dream, as something that never was. I'm dying to be good to you, Athka. Damn it, girl, how I can love you!"

But she did not hear him, was not even listening to him. She had turned away. Cursing her, he turned to the chain and changed it, making sure she would not get away from him. Now he might have taken her. The thought went through his mind. A bold man took what he wanted. No one had ever said Beauty Smith was not bold.

The dogs changed his mind. They had come forward and were looking at him, all six of them on their feet, two within a yard of him. One lifted his lip. What was he about to do? They seemed to ask the question with their eyes. Another curled back his lip. Beauty Smith straightened and backed away, a whispered oath coming from him.

"You've made your bed," he growled, "damned close to the fire."

CHAPTER IV

Blood of the North

SHE said nothing, merely rolled back under her bearskin and blanket. He turned, cursed when he stepped into the edge of the fire, and moved on to his bed, as a crescendo of wails rose beyond the cliffs.

Tomorrow, in broad daylight, he would get things done. The dogs would be hitched to the sled. He could chain the sled to a tree, and down in the snow it would happen, and—damn her!—she would have all day to sulk and get over it. Tomorrow morning, yes, just as soon as she hitched up the team, right here on this very ground, the sled tied to the tree where she was sleeping tonight.

At his bed he looked back at her. Why wait until morning? When and where had Beauty Smith ever waited for what he wanted? She was far more important right now than the gold. Hell, the gold was hard and cold and dead. Athka was soft and warm, full of hot breath and life if he handled her right. Hell, this was life—a woman and a strong man, and a strong man's need of a woman!

He started to turn back. A wolf wail split the air above him, the sounds cascading down as if they were icy water dashing over him. He slumped back with an oath, Olaf's six-shooter in his hand. A moment later he saw the dogs spring to their feet. Snarling and growling they

shot eastward, away from the cliffs. Cowards! He brought up the six-shooter but caught himself and held his fire. Some wolf had dared to come close to that side of the camp, and the dogs were driving it back.

The wails fell away away, and the dogs came back, instincitvely knowing that if they went too far, they would find themselves in a pack of killers. Beauty Smith was cold by this time. He rolled under the covering, both rifle and axe beside him. There was no thought of going to sleep yet. A man could not go to sleep in this excitement; and yet, before there was any realization of drowsiness, he was gone.

Athka knew he was gone. She had not moved on her side of the fire, but she knew; she could see the steady rise and fall of his bearskin in the light. She studied it a long time with speculative craftiness. After a long time she slid forward, moving the strong chain silently along. She dropped a loop of it in the fire, reached back, and pulled a small fir bough over the chain to hide it where it stretched from her bed to the fire.

It was a good chain, strong enough to hold a bull-moose, but the links were not welded. Somewhere in the great Outside strong steel wire had been put through a machine. The machine had cut the wire and shaped it into links and fastened them together in one operation. Now the chain was getting red hot in the fire, and even steel becomes soft and easy to bend when red hot.

She was watching Beauty Smith's bearskin all the time. The rise and fall was steady, but he might fling it aside at any moment. Then his big, powerful bulk would rear up, his popping eyes would stare wildly all around, and there would be a gun in his hand.

Athka had on her thick mittens. She eased up and lifted the chain out of the fire. Holding it tightly, feeling the searing heat through the mittens, she gave it a strong pull, then another, and a third with her whole body straining. The chain parted.

Trembling, she fell back and let the jagged ends of the chain down in the melted snow close ot the fire. There was a quick, peevish sizzle and a small puff of steam shot upward.

THE wolf wails began again a few minutes later, one seeming to be right up on the rim of the cliffs. Beauty Smith came bolt upright, six-shooter in his hand, eyes popping. Again he saw the growling and snarling dogs rush out eastward to drive something back into the blackness of the world beyond the firelight. Watching closely, he saw something a minute later, two gleaming eyes, but they were southward of where the dogs had gone. The six-shooter jutted forward. Beauty Smith fired once, hesitated a few seconds, and fired again, waited and fired again.

"Now—" Athka's voice came to him, and a glance showed him that she was sitting up in her bed—"you have killed Mamook, our good lead dog."

"No!" he snarled, flinging to his feet, six-shooter in one hand, the rifle in the other. "It was a damned wolf!"

He stumbled away toward his target. The rest of the dogs were still out there in the blackness, not far away, he knew. Blundering through the snow beyond the reach of the warmth of the fire he came to a halt at his kill. Damn it, it was Mamook! Yes, Mamook!

Damn! He turned back in the silence that had descended following his shots. He headed straight for Athka's bed, his nerves shot and needing her warmth to cool them. A woman could always cool a man. He stopped with an oath when he came to the bed. Athka was gone—gone, by heaven!

He got a glimpse of her and took out behind her. She was fleeing along under the cliffs that curved to the northeast. The chains she had wound around her arms glinted in the cold moonlight. She preferred the wolves out there to his company back here at the fire! Like a snorting mule he raced after her, great puffs of his hot breath filling the frosty air.

Athka fell at eighty yards, the chain

falling and tangling her ankles in spite of all she could do. The charging bull-gorilla that was Beauty Smith struck her, coming down on her and throwing her back, his breath hot on her face.

"Now, damn you!" he cried, a madman in the darkness. "I'll have you! I'll have you now! Then—then I'll drag you back and have you again and again! Damn it, I'm Beauty Smith! I killed a man to get you, Athka! All the wolves and dogs in the world can't keep me from you!"

She fought desperately, not a single cry coming from her. She beat at his bushy head, the chain clanking as her fists hammered him. He had dropped the rifle, and his big hands were clawing, pawing as if he would tear everything off her in the snow. In a sudden rage he struck her in the jaw, and she slumped back.

Then a furry shape hit Beauty Smith with a snarl of rage, and sharp fangs clicked as they gashed the back of his scalp, trying to penetrate the thick skull and sink themselves in his brain. With a great cry of terror he rolled and flung himself back from the girl, hand sawing for the six-shooter in his waistband, the other striking a big sled-dog on the side of the head and bowling him over in mid-air.

Again Beauty Smith was hit. This time with the rifle in Athka's quick hands. Rolling over and up, she had snatched it from the snow. In one swift blow she had brought it down on the man's head and saw him pitch forward in the snow. Now she spoke, for the first time, and it was to the dog that was coming in for another charge and to the other dogs racing up.

"Leloo!" she cried. "Leloo, down! Down, Leloo, down!"

Beauty Smith never knew that her command halted the dog's attack. He never saw the others stop in their tracks. He knew nothing about Athka leaping to her feet, reaching down and jerking the six-shooter away from his still figure. Beauty Smith knew nothing until he came back to his senses forty minutes later and found himself fastened to the bole of a strong young tree near the fire. Holding him there was the chain, padlocked, and the key to the padlocks were gone from his pocket. Athka stood before him, rifle on her arm. Beyond her were the dogs, drooling and whimpering to get at him. Silence held the outer world as if his shooting had driven all the wolves away. Athka was smiling down at him. She spoke evenly, gently.

"You are a fool, Beauty Smith. When we stopped here last night, I smelled the smoke of a campfire. It came over the cliffs from the west. Just a little smell, but it was enough. When you killed poor Mamook in your terror, you fired three shots about evenly spaced. In all the North, by North, Beauty Smith, three slow shots in the day or in the night means a call for help. You sent out the call. Who knows but what the ghost hand of my Olaf helped you lift the weapon and helped your finger pull the trigger. All the day yesterday, all the day just behind us, I had a feeling that my Olaf's spirit was beside me, watching over me, and sometimes his voice whispered on the breeze in my ear."

SHE began to sob then, backing away and sobbing as if her heart had broken at last. The dogs crowded around her, lips curling back in the firelight, fangs gleaming, frosted bristles standing on end. Beauty Smith was not afraid of the dogs nor was he surprised to see her cry like that. His mind and hearing were taking in other things.

A pistol shot had cracked to northward, and a fierce hissing and whining was growing in the darkness.

"They come, Beauty Smith." Athka was trying to laugh between her sobs. "A great sled pulled by a great string of dogs. My ears are better than your ears. There are four men with the sled, men of the North, Beauty Smith. Blood of the North. They'll take you to the place where they hang men like you. My Olaf's blood will not be unavenged. Somehow, perhaps in the way of an Indian, Beauty Smith, my Olaf's spirit stands close to me now, smiling at me through my tears."

TRAIL HERD

by HARRISON COLT

Garret came riding out of the dark—packing a name that was not his own!

GARRET rode up quietly through the darkness. From the direction of the trail herd, bedded down a short distance off to his right, the voices of the night herders, singing their hymns, mingled with the restless, stirring sounds of the cattle. He didn't bother to hail the camp, and the first inkling the men around the fire had of his presence was when he halted his bay at the edge of the ruddy, flickering circle of brightness near the chuck wagon.

The talk died away abruptly and unshaven, grimy-faced men swung around to stare at the newcomer with startled eyes. Garret let his own sharp, blue-eyed gaze move from man to man. It seemed to rest a shade longer on a small, dark-

complexioned man whose left cheek was disfigured by a jagged, ugly knife-scar.

"This the Circle T outfit?"

A tall young man with square shoulders and a granite-hard jaw gulped the last of his coffee, brushed a sleeve carelessly across his mouth and arose.

"Yeah, this is Circle T," he said. "What you want, Mister?"

"You got a lady name of Ann Taggart here in camp?"

The big man squinted at the horseman suspiciously. "What you want with her? My name's Torrey and I'm bossing this herd up the trail. Any business you got, you can take up with me."

"You in the habit of reading the lady's mail?"

"Eh? What's that?"

"I got a letter here addressed to the lady. If you don't mind, I'd like to turn it over to her and tell her how I come to have it."

The man with the scar had been regarding the newcomer closely. "Ain't I seen you some'eres afore, stranger?" he asked suddenly. "Seems your face is familiar."

Garret looked at him without expression. "If our trails ever crossed, I reckon I don't remember it."

"Ever been up north? Say, around Fort Miles up in Wyoming? I'm sure I seen you some place."

Garret shook his head. "Must have been somebody that looked like me. I never been that far north myself."

The man with the scar subsided, but he was frowning and his eyes were not friendly. The horseman turned his attention back to Torrey.

"Well, do I get to see the lady or not?"

The heavy-shouldered trail boss continued to scowl at him but one of the other men climbed stiffly to his feet. He was thin and tall and bony-faced, and his mouth was partially concealed by a drooping gray mustache.

He said, "She's in the wagon, Mister. I'll fetch her."

"Never mind, Gabe," came a young voice near at hand. "I'm right here."

A moment later a slender, dark-haired girl moved forward into the glow of the fire. Garret felt a little stir go through him. She was clad in men's range clothes, her face was not too clean, and there were traces of weariness and worry in her large brown eyes. Yet, despite all this, he could not fail to recognize the loveliness that lay in the fresh, youthful lines of her face, the subtle grace of her figure in the mannish garb.

"Miss Taggart?" Garret dragged off his Stetson hastily and now the firelight turned his face into lean, bold planes and crisp, hard-edged shadow.

"That's right."

Garret swung from the saddle and fumbled with some papers in his pocket. "I happen to have a letter here from your uncle," he said slowly. "I reckon maybe you better read it."

THE girl took the unsealed letter and started to read, turning away from the fire to let the light fall across the single page of writing. When she glanced up a minute later, there was surprise in her brown eyes. She eyed Garret curiously.

"So you're Luke Freer! Uncle Dan used to speak about you often. I always pictured you as being a much older man."

Garret's eyes narrowed briefly, then he smiled and said, "Don't let appearances deceive you, Ma'am. I'm not exactly a yearling."

The girl turned to the trail crew and announced, "Boys, this is Luke Freer. He's going to boss the herd the rest of the way to Abilene."

Garret saw some of the men stiffen in surprise. Several of them darted quick glances in the direction of Torrey. The big man seemed too stunned for a moment to say anything. Then a bitter scowl flitted across his face and he demanded, "That what your uncle wrote?"

The girl nodded. "I wrote to him about Tom Morrison right after the accident. It seems he got in touch with Luke right away."

"I see," growled Torrey. "I reckon he

figgered I couldn't get these cows to Abilene on my own. Had to have somebody to tell me which way is north! That shows how high an opinion your uncle has of me!"

"It's nothing like that, Lance. It's just —just that he has so much confidence in Luke Freer and this drive means so much to him!"

Torrey demanded sullenly, "Ann, do you mean you're going to turn the herd over to a complete stranger just because he rides up here with a letter from your uncle in his pocket?"

"Aren't you forgetting that Uncle Dan has a half-interest in these cattle?"

"And the other half belongs to you. You got as much right to pick a trail boss as he has!"

There was a troubled look in the girl's eyes. After a moment she shook her head. "No, Lance. I couldn't go against Uncle Dan's wishes when he's so old and sick. Losing the ranch would just about kill him. This cattle drive is his last chance to get back on his feet."

"You stand to be just as bad off as he is if this drive don't pan out."

"I know," said the girl. "But there's a difference. I haven't sunk a lifetime of hard work into it like he has. To me, the land and barns and corrals and buildings are just that—nothing more. They're a part of Uncle Dan. Can't you understand, Lance? I've got to do what he wants me to!"

Torrey made no reply but caught up his saddle from the ground and stalked off in the direction of the horse herd. A little later a horse galloped out of camp.

Garret turned puzzled eyes on the girl. "He pulling out for good?"

Ann Taggart smiled and shook her head. "No. He'll be back when he cools off. This isn't the first time he's done that after a quarrel."

LATER, while Garret ate supper and talked with the girl, he became aware that the thin man with the drooping mustache was squinting at him as if he had something on his mind. The oldster waited until the girl returned to the wagon before taking his place at Garret's side. By this time the rest of the crew had taken their bed rolls and moved off into the darkness.

He held out a huge, rope-calloused hand. "My name's Gabe Jackson, Luke. I heard Taggart mention you plenty of times. Sure is a relief to know that Torrey ain't going to be bossing this outfit no longer."

"You don't sound over-fond of Torrey," Garret drawled.

"I'd a heap rather cotton up to a rattlesnake." He dropped his voice cautiously. "Luke, you gotta be careful that the same thing don't happen to you that happened to Tom Morrison."

"Morrison? I thought that was an accident. Wasn't he killed in a stampede?"

Gabe Jackson shook his head. "Oh, they made it look like an accident, all right. But his horse showed up afterward without a scratch on it. I figger someone laid a gun barrel across Tom's skull in the excitement. Of course, after a man's been trampled by a bunch of cattle there ain't no way of proving it."

"You ever say anything about this to Miss Taggart?"

"Hell no! She wouldn't believe me nohow! She knows I don't like Torrey but I reckon she figgers it's just because I'm an ornery, wall-eyed old critter that don't know no better. Besides, nearly the last thing her pa did afore he died was to pick Torrey to ramrod the Circle T. I reckon she figgers it'd be disloyal to his memory to even suggest he mighta made a mistake."

"So Torrey's the regular Circle T ramrod. How come he got demoted to being Morrison's segundo when the herd started up the trail?"

"That was Dan Taggart's doing. He wanted an experienced trail boss to take his herd to Abilene and allowed that Torrey didn't fill the bill."

Garret considered the other's words. "If Morrison was murdered like you say, Torrey must be mighty anxious to be trail boss. Why?"

Gabe Jackson's face tightened into grim lines. "I don't know exactly what he's got in his mind, but I'm pretty sure he don't intend that this herd will ever arrive in Abilene." He shot a swift glance at Garret. "You see anything of another herd coming up the trail behind us?"

Garret nodded. "I rode around a big herd early this afternoon. Bar F outfit according to their brand."

Jackson swore softly. "I didn't know Ferris was that close behind us. Right after we started to round up our beef for the drive, I heard he was hurrying to get a trail herd together, too. But I thought he'd be at least a week behind us."

"Who's Ferris?"

"He's the gent who's had his eye on the Circle T ever since he came into the valley a couple of years back. Tried to force Taggart and the girl into selling, and when that didn't work, he bought up their notes at the bank, aiming to take over that way. Whether he succeeds or not depends on the outcome of this drive."

Garret was silent for a few moments. He asked suddenly, "That gent with the scar on his cheek—he been with Circle T long?"

"You must mean Larkin. No, he ain't been around long. He's one of the new hands Torrey signed on for the drive."

"Kinda handy gent with a gun, ain't he?"

"So I hear." Jackson frowned. "But how'd you know that? I thought you said you didn't know him?"

"I don't," Garret lied. "The way he wears that raw-hide holster tied down gives me the idea."

NEXT morning, with the herd resuming its march northward, Garret rode for a while beside the chuck wagon. The girl sat beside Barney, the cook, talking to him and Garret.

From time to time, Garret saw that her eyes rested on him with an odd expression in their depths. It took him a little while to recognize it for what it was—confidence. Confidence and trust. She thought he was her uncle's friend, Luke Greer, and she trusted him to get the herd through.

It gave Garret a queer feeling. He wondered what she would think if she knew Luke Greer was lying back along the trail with two bullets in him. . . .

For a week the Circle T herd moved up the trail. In that time Garret had a chance to study the men. He discovered that the crew fell into two sharp divisions. The older hands—Shorty Mills, Dawson, Gabe Jackson, and Barney the cook—had no liking for Torrey, and there was an undercurrent of friction between them and the men Torrey had brought in. Garret had the feeling that if it came to a showdown, these older men would side him. But they were only a small minority of the crew.

They were deep in the Nations now. There was plenty of grass and water, and the sun's warmth seemed to strike deeper day by day. The animals plodded steadily forward, dust spurting under their hoofs. To the bandanna-masked men riding drag, the air was filled with a choking, blinding haze. The crackling of hoofs and ankle joints mingled with the clashing of horns and the lowing and bleating of twenty-five hundred cattle.

At night under the stars, Garret frequently found himself lying awake, thinking of Ann Taggart. When he had ridden into camp, there had been a single purpose in his mind. Now he found that it had become a matter of profound importance to him that nothing disastrous happen to the girl or her herd.

As they came in sight of the Cimarron, Gabe Jackson smoothed his drooping mustache and stared at the river apprehensively.

"I got a funny feeling, Luke," he confided. "If Torrey intends to try something, this is the likely place for it. I'd sure feel a heap easier in my mind if the herd and everybody else was on that opposite bank right now!"

The cook wagon was floated across first. Then the leaders were shoved into the current with wild shouts and yells. Garret saw them across, then started to swim

his horse back to the south bank. Suddenly he felt his saddle shift under him. Next moment, he had plunged into the water. Half-strangled, he struggled to the surface. He had no chance to grab his horse's tail or mane. Already a widening distance separated him from the animal. A horned head bobbed dangerously close as he struck out desperately for the shore. He had been carried a quarter mile downstream before his boots touched bottom and he crawled up onto the bank. . . .

The herd was across the river and Barney was handing out steaming coffee to wet and tired men when Gabe Jackson rode up. The man beckoned and when Garret walked over to him, he said quietly, "Located your saddle, Luke. It got snagged by a piece of driftwood half a mile downstream. Luke, that cinch had been nearly sawed through with a knife!"

Garret looked thoughtful. "That seems to prove you were right about Morrison," he said soberly.

WHEN they started out next morning, Garret rode ahead, selected the place for the noon camp, and swung back to meet the chuck wagon and the remuda. From her seat beside the ruddy-faced cook, Ann smiled at him and called out a cheery greeting.

As he swung his horse alongside her, she said, "Luke, I've got a good feeling about this drive. Everything is going to turn out all right."

"I sure hope so," Garret said, returning her smile. "But Abilene is still a four or five-week drive, and a lot can happen in that time."

"But nothing will. I'm sure," Ann insisted.

"I wouldn't be *too* sure," Barney broke in. There was a smoldering anger in his pale blue eyes. "Not when there's gents like this Larkin hombre hanging around!"

Garret asked sharply, "What about Larkin?"

Barney muttered angrily under his breath. Aloud, he said, "If that ugly-faced, squint-eyed varmint with the sliced-up cheek is a trail herder, I'm the King of Siam! I'd say offhand his actual life-work was horse stealing or road agenting!"

Ann laughed. "Barney is riled because Larkin doesn't seem to cotton up to his cooking."

"It ain't only that," protested the little cook. "I never liked the hombre from the moment I set eyes on him. Calls himself Larkin, but that ain't the only name he goes by! I know because I heard another of them new hands call him 'Trant'!"

Garret's mouth tightened. "You sure of that?"

"Hell, yes! Ain't nothing wrong with my ears—even if I don't know how to cook after twenty years!"

Garret rode on thoughtfully, his expression troubled, like that of a man who has come to a crossroads and isn't sure which way to go.

When they reached the site Garret had picked, Barney halted the horses, made a fire, and began rattling pots and pans noisily. By noon the herd had caught up with the wagon, and the first batch of riders came in for their meal. Torrey and Larkin were among them. Once or twice as Garret ate, he glanced up to find Larkin's hard, unfriendly gaze fastened upon him.

The man burst out suddenly, "Greer, I'm getting mighty sick of eating dust back in the drag! I figure it's about time you give some of us drag riders a chance to ride point for a change!"

Garret was more startled by Larkin's arrogant tone than by his demand, but he said calmly, "Nobody likes to ride drag, Larkin. But somebody's got to do it, and the job naturally falls to the newcomers in an outfit. That's the rule. You know that as well as I do."

"Rule be damned!" growled Larkin. "I'm asking you to shift me up in front of the herd and I'd take it as a right unfriendly act if you was to say no!"

The threat in his voice was unmistakable. Garret glanced swiftly at the faces of the other men and saw the tense expectancy in their eyes. Torrey was leaning carelessly against the rear wheel of the canvas-covered wagon, but his gaze

was watchful and eager.

Garret realized then that this had been planned. He put aside his plate and climbed to his feet. Larkin hastily did likewise, his hand hovering over his tied-down holster.

Garret said quietly, "I'm not interested in how you take it, Larkin. The answer is still no!" He turned and started toward the remuda.

Larkin spat out an oath and yelled, "Come back here, you damned skunk!"

Garret spun around. For a moment it seemed that he was about to make a move toward his gun; then his shoulders sagged, and he said, "All right, Larkin. There's some justice in what you say. You can trade places with Shorty Mills."

COMPLETE silence held as the men turned astounded, disbelieving eyes on the trail boss. Garret saw disappointment cloud the faces of Larkin and Torrey.

Shorty Mills began to protest. "You letting him get away with that?" Rage flared in his eyes and he added, "I'll quit afore I ride drag again!"

Garret said sharply, "That's up to you."

The plump, round-faced cowboy eyed him for a brief moment in disgust. Then he gave a careless shrug. "Okay, you win. I'll stick till we get to Abilene. I owe Taggart and the girl that much. I reckon a man that ain't too handy with a gun *has* to take the orders you dish out." He threw a significant glance at Larkin.

Day by day the herd drew nearer to Abilene. But increasingly it became clear that the trail boss had lost the respect of most of his men when he had backed down before the scar-faced gunman. They accepted his orders with ill grace and more than a touch of defiance. Even Ann became aware of it, and the worry came back into her brown eyes.

Dropping back from his place near the point one afternoon, Garret saw Torrey and the girl riding together off to one side of the slowly-moving herd. He reined his horse toward them, coming up in time to hear Torrey say, ". . . so there it is, Ann. When Ferris sent word he wanted to see me, I rode back down the trail and had a talk with him. He says—"

Torrey broke off in annoyance as he caught sight of Garret. But the girl said, "Go ahead, Lance. I don't know any reason why Luke Freer shouldn't hear this."

Torrey glared angrily at the trail boss. "Well—according to Ferris, he's got more cows than his crew can handle. Claims he could use ten more riders. And he isn't satisfied with his ramrod. Told me if I was willing to join him, the job was mine."

"I see," said the girl stiffly. "Then you've decided to take his offer?"

Torrey said, "No, Ann. I ain't made up my mind yet. Whether I do or not is up to you. But if I stay it won't be as any segundo to a boss who hasn't the stomach to stand up to the men under him!"

Garret saw that the girl's eyes were flashing with anger. "If your price for remaining with the Circle T herd is Luke Freer's job, I have no intention of paying it!"

Torrey reddened under the lash of the girl's voice, and a momentary disappointment flickered in his eyes. Then a sullen scowl twisted his features and he said, "You better think this over, Ann. Maybe you don't understand that when I quit, most of your crew will quit with me!"

"Let them!" the girl exclaimed furiously. "If they've got the same brand of loyalty you have, it'll be good riddance!"

AFTER Torrey and his friends pulled out, there were five of the Circle T crew left—Gabe Jackson, Shorty Mills, Dawson, young Joe the horse-wrangler, and Barney the cook. Barney, despite his bad leg, forked a horse and became a trail herder again after an interval of twenty years, and Ann Taggart took over his job.

Garret pushed the herd northward as fast as he could. He cut out a dozen or more of the slower animals from the drag and was thankful for the added miles covered each day. This did not escape the notice of the girl. Once when she dis-

covered him searching the horizon to the south for the dust cloud that would mark an advancing herd, she asked, "You're expecting trouble, aren't you?"

He started to deny it, but the straightforward, quietly courageous look in Ann's brown eyes made him decide to be truthful. "I'm afraid I am, Ann. Ferris has gone to a heap of trouble to see that this herd doesn't arrive at Abilene intact. He ain't likely to call a halt now."

Late that night, resting his head against the hard leather of his saddle, Garret gazed up at the stars and listened to the voices of Dawson and Shorty Mills, on night guard.

Suddenly a ripple of gunshots smashed the silence. Steers bawled frantically. At once the ground was throbbing with the heavy pound of thousands of hoofs. Garret was racing for his horse when he heard a man's terrified scream. It broke off abruptly, and his mind conjectured up a picture of a rider going down before a frenzied avalanche of panic-stricken longhorns.

Then he was in the saddle, riding hard, with other riders pounding at his side. He caught a glimpse of Gabe Jackson, flapping a blanket wildly in an effort to turn the stampeding cattle. The smell of dust was acrid in his nostrils. . . .

The first paleness of morning was streaking the east before the longhorns were slowed to a walk and turned to form a milling circle. Gabe Jackson drifted up to Garret's side and said sorrowfully, "I'd guess there ain't more'n five hundred head here. And with our short-handed crew, we're going to have a hell of a time rounding up the rest of the herd."

"You got any idea how this started?" Garret inquired. "Who was it fired those shots?"

Jackson shrugged. "Maybe Shorty can tell us. I think he was over on that side of the herd when the ruckus started."

But the perspiring, dust-covered rider only shook his head. "All I know is I saw somebody at the edge of the herd a minute before the gun started blazing. Seems to me the herd split into two parts and headed in opposite directions."

"Did you hear a man yell?"

Mills nodded. "Yeah. Sounded to me like his horse must of stepped in a hole and gone down. I figure he won't stampede no more herds."

They headed the cattle back toward the trail a little later that morning, combing the draws and coulees for little bunches of scattered beef that they threw into the main body. Ann Taggart and the kid horse-wrangler rode up, chousing a sizable bunch of cows ahead of them. But the greater part of the herd was still missing.

Garret said, "They must have scattered out south or west of the bedground. Gabe, you and Shorty and Dawson come with me." There was another possibility in the back of his mind but he didn't voice it.

Not far from the bedground of the night before the four men came across the body of a man and a horse. Garret's eyes hardened as he recognized him. It was one of the men who had deserted to the Bar F with Lance Torrey.

Riding on, they fanned out. Garret came across little bunches of Circle T steers, but he pressed on without stopping to gather them up. His anxiety about the whereabouts of the bulk of the herd increased.

PRESENTLY Shorty Mills came galloping back, his eyes snapping with excitement. "Just saw a bunch of riders driving off some of our cows. They was heading south."

Garret swung his horse, and the two men rode south. Soon they came across tracks that indicated a large number of cattle had been driven in-this same direction recently.

It was late morning, however, before they crested a slight rise and saw the bannering dust churned up by a vast herd. As they moved toward it, three horsemen headed out to meet them. They drew near, and Garret recognized the big figure of Lance Torrey and the scar-faced gun-

man beside him. Slightly in advance of them galloped a man whose heavy-jowled features bore the arrogant look of a man used to having his own way. Garret knew this was Sid Ferris.

"State your business, gents!" Ferris called, pulling up a dozen yards away.

"We're looking for some Circle T cows," Garret explained. "Herd was in a stampede last night, and we figured some of our stuff drifted down this way."

"Sorry," said Ferris, his tone curt. "We ain't seen none of 'em. Have we, boys?"

Torrey grinned a little. "Nary a sign, Mr. Ferris."

Garret swung his gaze toward the plodding sea of cattle a quarter of a mile off. "Looks like your herd is considerably larger than it was three weeks ago when I passed it coming up the trail."

Ferris frowned. "Maybe so. Bought out a couple of small drovers on the way up here."

"Maybe a few head of Circle T cattle got picked up by accident. You got any objection to me making sure?"

"Damn right!" The Bar F owner had grown red of face, and his eyes were bright with anger. "I told you those were my cattle! I don't intend to have any damn trail cutters worrying my beef!"

For a moment none of the men moved or spoke. Then Larkin nudged his horse forward. He grinned, the jagged line of the scar on his cheek standing out sharply.

"Better light a shuck while you can, Freer," he advised. "You heard what the boss said."

Shorty Mills shifted uneasily in his saddle. He darted quick, worried glances at the man beside him. "Come on, Luke. Ain't no Circle T stuff here. Anyone can see that."

But Garret ignored him. He was looking straight at the scar-faced gunman. "I'm in no hurry, Trant."

The gunman's jaw sagged, and suspicion leaped into his eyes. "Trant? Why'd you call me that?"

"Because that's your name. Just as my name is Garret—Tom Garret!"

"Garret! Then you're—"

"Yeah. Deputy U.S. Marshal Sam Garret was my brother. He was killed trying to serve a warrant on a man named Trant. A man with a scar on his face."

Trant's face was hard and cruel. "No wonder I thought I'd seen you some place. You'n him look a lot alike. And I got a notion you'll die alike, too!"

As he finished speaking, his hand moved. Sunlight glinted off the upswinging barrel of his gun, and he fired hurriedly. Garret felt the burn of the bullet on the side of his neck as his own gun bucked in his hand and bucked again.

The scarred features of the gunman showed disbelief as he began to lean in the saddle. Then he tumbled limply to the ground. Torrey and Ferris seemed stunned by surprise. When Torrey made a belated grab for his gun, Garret heard Shorty Mills call out sharply, "Reach, gents—or your friend will have company where he's going!"

Torrey and the Bar F owner raised their hands unwillingly under the threat of the cowboy's gun. Garret quickly disarmed them.

"Now, Ferris," he said, "you're going to ride back with us and tell your men to cut out every head of Circle T stock and drive 'em north to rejoin our herd! And if you do any stammering, remember I got a bullet with your name on it right here in this gun!"

ONCE more the Circle T herd was strung out along the trail. Ann Taggart's brown eyes held warm glints of thankfulness as she rode beside Garret and Gabe Jackson and looked back at the flowing tide of heads and horns.

"I can hardly believe it," she said. "We lost only about fifty head. Luke—I mean Tom—I don't know how Uncle Dan and I can ever thank you for what you did."

Garret said, "That goes both ways. I'd been hunting the killer of my brother for a long time. Down at Doan's Crossing on the Red I heard about the gent with the scar. Following him up the trail, I ran onto the body of this Luke Freer. I

suspect he made the mistake of inquiring at the Bar F camp about the trail herd ahead. Ferris found out he'd been sent to replace Torrey and had a bushwhacker trail him when he left camp.

"I took the letter from Greer's pocket, intending to turn it over to you and explain what had happened. Then I rode into camp and saw this fellow with the scar sitting there. I didn't know if he was the right man or not. So when you mistook me for Luke Freer, I decided to keep still and see what would happen."

A faint frown touched the girl's face. "But later, when Barney told you about overhearing him called Trant, you couldn't have any further doubts. Yet you kept on pretending to be Luke Freer. Why?"

Gabe Jackson chuckled. "I reckon I know why," he cackled. "By that time Luke or Tom or whatever his name is was a heap more concerned about you and your cows than he was about settling accounts with his brother's killer! And when Trant tried to pick a quarrel with him, he backed down for the same reason! Ain't that right, trail boss?"

Garret reddened under the man's gaze. "Trant was supposed to be a fast man with a gun, and I wasn't sure who'd come out on top in a shoot-out. So I figgered I'd try and get the herd to Abilene and then come back and hunt up Trant." He paused, then added on impulse, "That's the least a man could do for a girl he'd fallen in love with!"

Ann's eyes were dancing, but she didn't seem as surprised as Garret had expected she would be. "Luke, darling! I—" She halted. "Oh darn, there I go calling you Luke again!"

Garret grinned. "That's all right, Ann," he said quickly. "Call me anything you like—just so long as you marry me!"

● ● ●

ACCIDENT OF BIRTH

by Manly E. David

SCIENTISTS CLAIM that if man hadn't been born with a thumb that opposed the forefinger, so he could hold things easily, he would never have become the civilized animal that he is. He would probably still be running on all four legs, a lot better off physically, but having to go without a lot of things he now stands upright and enjoys, including having made a slave out of another animal.

The horse seems to have had two separate accidents of birth which destined him to be enslaved by a still smaller animal, the one who could stand on his hind legs. Scientists cannot make up their minds which of the two peculiarities caused the horse to fit so well into men's plans.

One group claims that the subjugation of the horse was only possible because the horse has a gap between the incisor teeth and the molars, allowing a bit to fit into his mouth so that he can be controlled by the pressure on his tongue. You can't control a horse that gets the bits between his teeth; without that gap, he could not have been mastered.

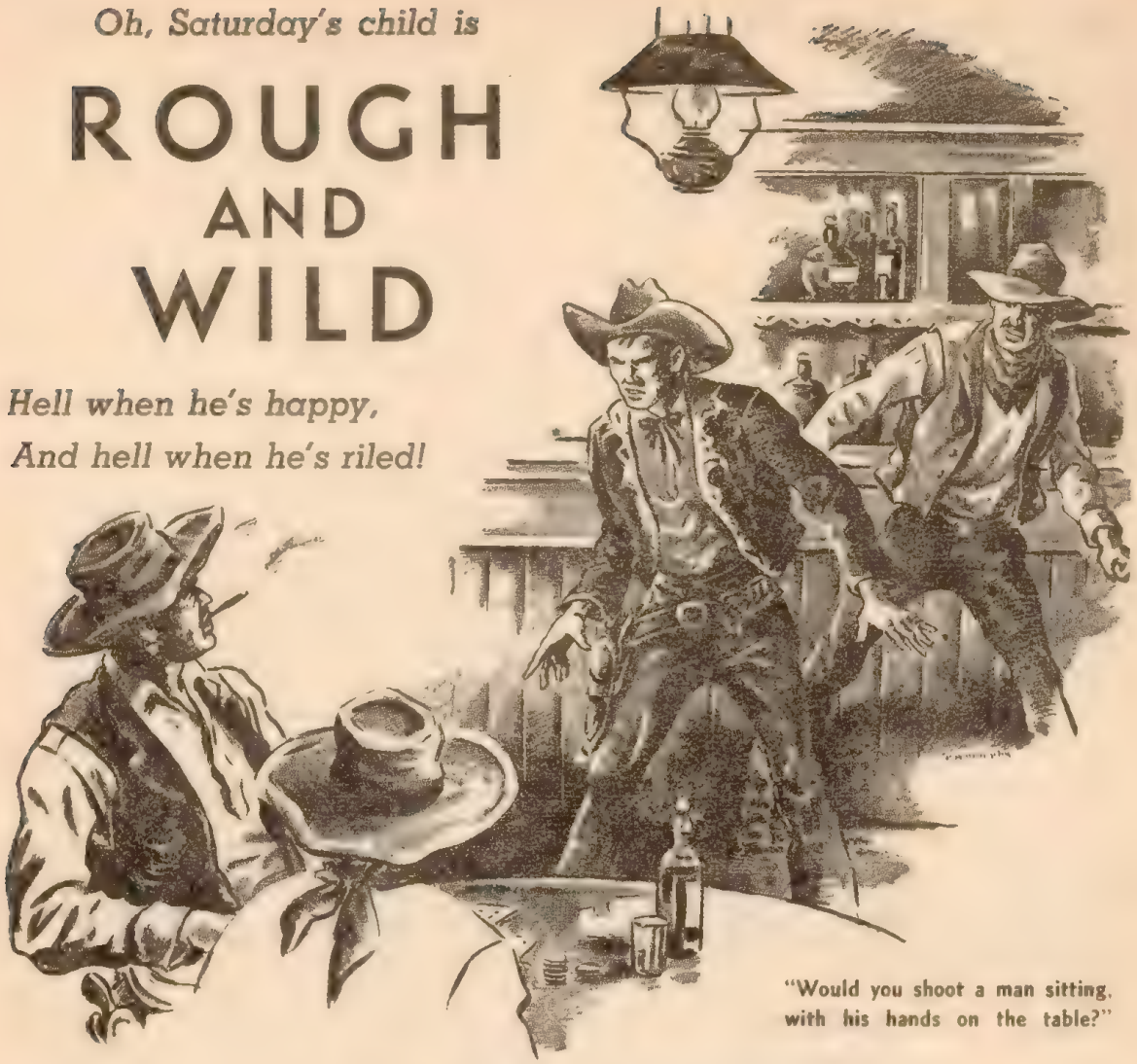
The other group of scientists claim that the horse is useful to man only because he has a hard shell over his feet, a horny boot which transmits heat and cold very slowly, thus enabling him to walk in all kinds of temperatures without any crippling effect from the heat or cold, such as frozen feet or blistered feet.

At any rate, it wouldn't be wise for the rider to be too proud; he is sitting on the horse only by the grace of a couple of accidents.

Oh, Saturday's child is

ROUGH AND WILD

Hell when he's happy,
And hell when he's riled!



"Would you shoot a man sitting, with his hands on the table?"

By DE WITT NEWBURY

TRAY GRADY had been on the new job for a month. He was the best buckaroo who'd ever worked for the B Star horse ranch and the youngest. Now he had pay in his pocket and a day off. It would be his first day in town.

The other hands watched him rummage in his warbag. They were slow and easy-going, old-timers who liked a quiet game in the bunkhouse with a bottle handy.

They watched him pull on a purple shirt, shake the wrinkles out of buckskin jacket and breeches. Mexican duds—no good to work in but fine for show. They eyed his fancy boots and silver spurs.

Of course Singing Slater had to yowl:

"Oh, Saturday's child
Is rough and wild,
Hell when he's happy,
And hell when he's riled!
He's ready and willing,
Just give him a chance!
He'll put salt on your tail,
And he'll pepper your pants!"

His side-kick, Brindle, did some loud whistling. "Mighty Moses!" he said. "The gals will all r'ar up when you come prancing!"

Tray winked at the old rannies. "So there's girls?"

"Sure!" Slater told him. "Nester gals with freckles and pigtails. Some high-toned females, too, belonging to the mine company big bugs. They wear bonnets and damn it, they tote parrysols!"

"But no sporting women," Brindle added. "They ain't allowed."

"Ma warned me against 'em, anyhow." Tray sighed. "Must be a slow sort of town."

The boss was lounging in the doorway, his pipe reeking below his horseshoe mustache. Ben Starret was another of the easy-going kind. He'd seen plenty rough times; now he was contented to breed saddle stock. Now he said:

"Bentwater *is* slow, some ways," he drawled. "Ain't no wide-open cow town. Not since mining started in the west hills and nesters dug into the valley. The townfolks don't like us riding fools, son. So don't raise too much hell."

"I won't," Tray promised. "I'll just look 'em over."

"And let 'em look you over," Starret said with a nod. "They'll get an eyeful, at that!"

Tray jingled out to his horse, which was already groomed to a polish and saddled. This wasn't his best horse, being dumb-headed, but it was certainly the showiest. A big buckskin—to match the Mexican rig—with golden mane and tail.

HE GRINNED to himself as he rode away northward. Those old boys warning him about the town! Warning him to behave! That was what their jawing had meant, and Starret had come right out with it. They ought to know he could take care of himself anywhere!

Tray Grady was all man and lean, quick and handy.

He rode through grassland beside Bentwater Creek. Had to open and shut three gates, because the B Star pastures were fenced. Plenty of stock there. Brood mares with their fuzz-tailed colts, fillies grazing in bunches, whistling, scampering geldings.

Tray liked them all. Not blooded stuff, of course, such as Judge Whitring raised for a rich man's game on his fancy ranch over eastward, but they were sound work stock.

Soon he was beyond the last fence. The creek curved away to the left, its bend choked with cottonwoods and brush. He saw a buck whirl into the woods with a flash of white tail.

He'd remember that piece of timber, come fall. Likely plenty of deer drifted down from the hills.

Somehow Tray forgot the town until he topped a rise and saw it stretching back from the creek and the bridge that led to the mine. Quite a place!

The side streets were full of new houses, but the main thoroughfare still looked like a cow-town street. It lay wide and dusty, bordered by old, false-fronted stores and saloons.

Yet even this didn't look right as Tray rode nearer. There was a Saturday crowd in town, but too many farm rigs were at the rails, too few saddle ponies. He saw booted miners, nesters with their sunbonneted wives and barefoot children. He saw dudes with coats on, too, strolling the board sidewalk. And dressed-up women. Yes, one had a sunshade up, a little umbrella!

Well, he'd give them all a surprise, stir up some of that dust! He nudged the buckskin with a spur, and it jumped into a run.

He saw at a glance that the crowd was thickest at the general store. There was no hitch-rail in front; the sidewalk widened into a loading platform on one corner of which stood a stack of empty barrels.

Tray saw them without especial notice as he tore up the street.

Faces turned at the drumming of hoofs. "Getting their eyeful!" Tray thought. Just short of the platform, the horse stopped short with planted feet and began to buck. Tray used both spurs.

Right then the stacked barrels toppled and fell from the platform into the road with a hollow, splintering thump. Straight under the bolting buckskin they rolled. The horse crashed a hoof through one,

kicked another which caromed and spun. The terrified animal somersaulted, nose down and heels up. Tray felt himself somersaulting, too.

He whammed down on his back, full length, in a cloud of dust. A woman screamed as he struck.

Of course he knew how to fall. He was up in a moment, limping a little. The buckskin was struggling to rise but could not make it. A foreleg was broken.

There was only one thing to do. Tray whipped out his gun, caught the floundering horse by the forelock, and shot close and true. The heavy head fell from his hand, the kicking legs grew still.

Feeling sick, Tray turned away. He picked up his hat, left-handed, slapped it against his dusty breeches. Then, the gun still in his right hand, he clinked over to the platform and faced the staring crowd.

"Who did that?" he asked. "Who heaved those barrels?"

Nobody answered. He had given them a show, all right, maybe a funny one. But nobody laughed, and it was well they didn't.

Different as they were, all the people now acted alike. They looked at Tray's set face and steady eyes, and their own faces grew blank, and they shifted their eyes away from him. Only one man opened his mouth, enough to show white teeth under a black line of mustache. Then this big fellow turned away carelessly and pushed through the crowd, his square shoulders swinging.

Others began to move. The woman with the parasol—the one who had screamed, Tray thought—lowered the thing and walked into the store. Some followed her, the rest hurried away up or down the street.

ON THE sidewalk by this time, Tray started after the big square-shouldered man, the one who had half smiled. His way was barred by a gaunted specimen with a bobcat vest and a set of gray whiskers.

The whiskered man patted a star pinned to his spotted vest. "Cool off, young feller," he croaked. "Put that gun away."

"You the sheriff?" Tray demanded, breathing hard.

"Deppity," the old codger answered. "Sheriff's over east. This ain't the county seat."

"Mister Deputy," Tray said, "some joker heaved those barrels and spoiled a good horse. Well—not so good, but *my* horse. What you going to do about it?"

"Easy now!" the deputy scolded. "Nobody heaved no barrels, I don't reckon. You shook 'em loose your own self, cavorting thataway. You rough-riding, gun-slinging hombres make a lotta trouble, and the golrammed town expects me to tame ye."

Tray grinned tightly. This jigger was sort of human, he thought. "So I got my come-uppance? Was showing off and got served right?"

"Oh, no," the whiskered man soothed. "It's too bad about your horse. Even so, you can't shoot up the place, puncher."

Nodding glumly, Tray put his gun away. "I'm no cowhand," he said. "Work for the B Star. You know Starret?"

The deputy's eye brightened. "Sure do! Used to be a hell-roarer."

"Know Singing Slater and Brindle?"

"Sure, sure! They was all hell-roarers in the old days. Why, them and Jim Jordan, here, that keeps the store— But times has changed."

Tray shook his head. "Reckon they have. Sorta gone sour!"

He stepped off the sidewalk and stripped saddle and bridle from the dead buckskin, and took them into the store. He could pick a quarrel here if he wanted to—about leaving their empties around so carelessly.

The store was a busy place. Drygoods on one side, and women at the counter there. Groceries on the other side, both men and women dickering. Hardware in the rear, where some farmers were roosting on nail kegs, waiting their turn. They saw Tray come in, and the buzz of voices dropped.

A girl saw him, too, and stepped from behind the drygoods counter. "What do

you want, cowboy?" she asked.

Tray decided not to quarrel with her. "I'm a horse-buster," he explained for the second time. "You belong here, miss?"

"Yes," she told him. "I'm Evie Jordan. I help my uncle." She was a smallish girl in neat blue gingham and was neither freckled nor pigtailed. Her face was tanned a warm brown, and her brown hair curled down in back.

Tray dangled his bridle, feeling shy. "Then I'd like to leave my leather in the corner there if you don't mind. Guess I can hire a pony somewhere to lope me home."

"Of course!" Evie said impulsively. "I'll take care of your things." She looked up at him, and suddenly her eyes filled with tears. "I saw your—your accident—and it was a shame! You were riding so well, on such a lovely horse! Now your nice clothes are all dirtied. There's a rip in your jacket!"

He shifted uneasily. She'd seen the conceit knocked out of him and she was sorry. Almost crying! For the horse, probably.

"Doesn't matter," he murmured.

"It does matter!" Evie insisted. "That Devoe ought to be ashamed!"

Tray stiffened. "Devoe!" he said slowly. "What Devoe?"

The girl was frowning, brows puckered. "I saw him do it. He put his foot against the bottom barrel and pushed!"

"He did, hey?" Tray spoke softly. "You know the snoozer?"

Evie hesitated. "Not very well."

"But you know how he looks. Say—was he that big bucko in the black coat? The man with the black mustache?"

"Yes," Evie said, "that was Blackie Devoe. But—"

Tray didn't wait for her to finish. "Be back later," he said and left.

The street was as crowded as ever, but the old deputy had disappeared. Farm families gossiped or carried supplies to the wagons. Miners clumped in and out of saloons and eating houses. Tray started along the sidewalk, eyes searching everywhere.

He was searching for a black-mustached fellow in a black coat. Perhaps that fellow hadn't meant to spoil a horse but he had meant to be mean, meant to lay a rider in the dirt. The sheer malice of it made Tray clench his teeth until they hurt.

DEVOE wasn't in the street, so Tray tried the restaurants and saloons, one after another. It was the same everywhere. When he came in, spurs jingling, men would glance around at him. Some faces showed curiosity, some were blank. Stray cowhands would seem ready to be friendly. Then they would note his still face and roving eyes and would turn back to their food or liquor.

It was that way until he came to the last saloon.

Tray slapped through the swing doors and halted. His quick gaze took in the whole place. The bar, at the right, was lined with drinkers. Drunks sprawled in chairs at the left. At the back, card players hunched over tables. The man Tray wanted sat facing him at the nearest table. He stepped forward. At the clinking sound of his spurs all talk in the room stopped.

In the sudden silence Tray said gently, "Devoe!"

The swarthy man looked up. His black eyes flickered a little as he laid his cards face down and spread both hands flat on the table.

"Devoe," Tray said, "I hear you been using one foot. Now use one hand—to draw with!"

The big fellow didn't move, only let his teeth show under his black mustache. "I'll do no such thing," he said easily. "You're loco, buckaroo."

"Loco nothing." Tray still spoke softly. "I saw you there, and somebody else saw you kick."

"Who was that?" Devoe asked pleasantly.

"Never mind. Get on your hind legs and pull iron. I'm waiting!"

The other smiled more widely. "I won't do it. Won't draw on a fool kid. You were

riding too high, and that's why you came down."

Tray's hand seemed to burn and tingle. His voice was hoarse as he said, "Reach for your gun—or I won't wait!"

Devoe shrugged his square shoulders. "Would you shoot a man sitting, with his hands on the table?"

Tray waited hopefully for three long minutes, before he turned to the goggling men who had squeezed against the bar. "Take notice, all you. I brought a fight to this yahoo, and he wouldn't take it."

Slowly he strolled to the door.

He sauntered up the street with a challenging stare for every man he met. No one would look him in the face. Every one gave him plenty of room.

He'd been feeling cold inside. Now he began to feel hot. Sort of helpless, too, as if he'd been fighting a bunch of pillows that wouldn't fight back. If only some jasper would snicker at him, make a crack about his tumble!

Halfway back to the store he glimpsed a gaunt figure sidling out of an alley. His hand flicked to his gun, then fell slack.

"Been trailing ye," the old deputy said, "you ramblin' hunk of trouble! Hadn't ye better mosey outa town afore there's a ruckus? If ever I seen a longhorn on the prod—"

"Needn't worry," Tray interrupted. "I been hunting war all over town and can't find any."

"Can't blame folks for dodging a rattler. Say, I oughta arrest ye for leaving a dead critter in the public road. That's agin the town rules."

"Try it," Tray suggested.

"Guess I won't," the deputy decided. "Might hafta call out the army. Well, you can pick up a live hoss at the livery stable."

"Going for my leather," Tray said. "I don't crave to linger."

It was noontime, and he found the store nearly empty. The storekeeper was in back, weighing nails for a lone customer. Jim Jordan was bent, bearded, and half bald. His niece, Evie, was leaning on the drygoods counter.

She came to meet Tray. "I'm glad you're back!" she exclaimed. "I was afraid. You went after Blackie?"

Tray shrugged. "He wouldn't fight, and I couldn't just crack down on him. Who is he, anyway?"

EVIE came closer. "I don't like him. He's been staying here for the last few days. I don't know why. Uncle Jim doesn't like him, either. Uncle knew him before somewheres and told him he'd better move on while the moving was good. But he said he'd hang around a while, for old time's sake."

"Then he's new here?" Tray was surprised. "So I can't blame him on the town? Makes no difference, though. I'm through. Never wanta see the place again."

"Tell you what!" the girl said quickly. "I'll lend you my pony. He's a nice little paint, he'll carry you anywhere."

"Why, thanks!" Tray accepted. "You're nice yourself, Miss Evie. Nicest thing in Bentwater!"

He meant that, and she knew he meant it. Her cheeks colored up. Real pretty, he thought as he stooped for his saddle, pretending not to notice.

Carrying his gear, he followed Evie out of the store and through a side alley to a stable yard. The paint pony was loose there; it nickered and came to nuzzle its mistress. Another, louder nicker came inside the stable.

Tray looked the pony over and thought how he'd feel, cantering home on a borrowed bronc before his Saturday was half over. Slater and Brindle would joke him ragged, and he'd have to take it.

A second thought. Why hadn't he smacked Devoe in the snoot? That had simply never occurred to him! He'd been so set on shooting.

Evie was saying, "Blackie put his horse in our stable. He certainly is cheeky! It's beautiful, though. As handsome as the one you lost. Want to see? He said it had to be shut up safe, it was so valuable."

She swung the door open. Noonday light flooded in, and Tray saw a stallion in a box stall. He went close, staring

hard. He'd never seen anything like that horse before.

It wasn't only the color—silver gray with black mane and tail—but the sleek body, barreled and limbed for speed. The broad chest, powerful shoulders, and arched neck. The wide-set eyes, the forehead that tapered to a delicate muzzle.

Something like the very best of the wild horses; but there was no comparison as to size and shape. The stallion wasn't wild, either. He put his head over the top bar and blew gently.

Tray hung his saddle on the bar and shook out the blanket.

Evie gasped. "You're not going to—?"

"Daddy warned me against stealing," he countered. "You were lending me a pony. Just tell your friend that I chose this."

She smiled delightedly. "Blackie isn't my friend, and he killed your horse. It'll serve him right if you ride his!"

Tray left town as if on wings. He turned in the saddle to wave to Evie. She waved back from the store platform.

A lot of people watched him go. The street seemed full of faces—and there was the old deputy! He had shoved back his floppy hat and was scratching his wrinkled forehead.

The stallion was eager to show his paces, fairly begged to be tried out, so Tray spent some time on the flats. He answered every pressure of knee, every touch of the rein. His trot was long and springy, his canter like an easy chair. His run was like nothing but flying.

The big Whitring outfit couldn't show anything better, Tray was willing to bet. And he had to belong to a fellow like Devoe!

Heading home, Tray took the long rise at a walk. At the top he reined up for a backward look. From below he hadn't been able to see what was happening in town, but now he got a surprise.

He saw a string of riders coming out of the place, lickety-split and hell-for-leather!

The deputy was leading. Devoe came next, riding bareback on a rawboned farm horse. The rest were nesters, town men, and a few punchers.

Whom were they after? An easy question. They were after a horse thief!

Tray had to laugh. Maybe the joke was on them, maybe on him. He didn't know yet. One thing was certain: Bentwater was a livelier town than he'd thought! They'd never catch him, though. He simply lifted the reins and flew away.

BUT it wasn't that easy, he began to realize. Where was he going? Evidently that posse wasn't joking. Those fellows meant to rope a real rustler!

If he breezed on to the B Star, the crew would back him up. Probably Starret would, too, so he'd have a chance to explain and hand over the stallion. Yet there might be bad tempers and worse trouble. And he'd have brought it home.

If he rode some other way, he'd have to keep going. He *would* be a horse lifter then and no fooling!

Suddenly he remembered the river bend he had passed that morning, the point full of thick woods that would be a place to hide out. It was simple, after all. He'd strip his leather when he reached the timber and turn the stallion loose, head him back with a crack on the rump.

The posse would get their horse while Tray squatted in the woods. Hoofing a few miles to the ranch would be tough in his high-heeled boots, but he could make it. He'd ease into the bunkhouse after dark and be in his bunk before anybody was the wiser.

So that was what he did. At least, he started to do it.

At the edge of the woods he pulled rein and wheeled the stallion. Stepping down, he slipped off saddle and bridle and gave the shining haunch a smart slap.

"Shoo fly!" he said. "Get out!"

The stallion galloped away, free and happy, but stopped to roll and frolic. Tray pushed into a bushy place and spread his saddle blanket.

He lay down, head on his saddle. His stomach was grumbling for dinner, but it felt good to stretch out in the shade. He

relaxed and shut his eyes.

Only for a little later—he had hardly dropped into a snooze, it seemed—a warm, grass-smelling breath fanned fanned his face. He opened his eyes.

The stallion had come back to him and now, looming ghostly in the green shadow, whickered and nipped with velvet lips.

Tray sat up and rubbed the silvery nose. "Doggone it!" he complained. "Now you're stealing me, hey?"

A sound came to him, and he squirmed to his knees. Beyond the bushes and the cottonwoods there was a pounding and hallooing, the clumping of hoofs and the yammering of tongues. He heard the deputy's cracked voice.

"Horse signs are a leetle confusing. He turned north again. But he circled back and went into the timber right here."

"Let's go get him!" this from some reckless puncher.

"Wait!" the deputy objected. "He didn't hafta stay in the brush. Mighta went on through. Some of ye ride around by the river—head him off, if he's still here."

The stallion's ears were cocked, his head high. Tray grabbed for his muzzle but too late to check a querulous whinny.

"Hi-yah!" the cowboy whooped. "The blatherskite's in there, all right!" A gun whammed, and a bullet sang through the bushes.

From sheer instinct Tray yanked his iron and sent back a couple. He had sense enough to aim high, though, and sense enough to jump sideways and hug a tree, while lead whipped the place he'd left. The stallion followed him like a dog.

A yell stopped the gunfire, a bellow from Devoe. "Hold on! Quit shooting, damn you! If my horse is killed or crippled—"

"Let's all go in!" the puncher whooped again.

Again the deputy objected. "We better talk this over. That buckaroo is crazy enough to bushwhack a few."

Talk? Tray could talk, and it was high time he did. "Hello, out there!" he called. "I ain't crazy, and I'm no horse thief! Just borrowed from Blackie Devoe, seeing as how he put me afoot!"

Silence, followed by a rumble of argument. Then Devoe yelled, "All right, you damn' troublemaker! We'll see. I'm coming for my horse."

"Come ahead," Tray told him and hugged his tree.

Devoe had dismounted. He came carefully, alert as a hunter, holding his shooter muzzle up, cocked and ready.

He spied the stallion, bulking whitely amongst green foliage, and changed his course. He caught sight of Tray, peering around the tree. Instantly he fired.

Tray had dodged back. A bullet barked the tree, two whacked into it. He hunkered low and shot once around the other side.

This was just what he'd wanted a while ago. But now he'd cooled off. He had trouble enough. He didn't want to kill, only to gain a moment's time while Devoe ducked.

HE GAINED it—time enough to slip behind the stallion. The horse stood like a gentleman, in spite of the racket. Tray leveled his gun across the sleek gray back and asked, "Who's bushwhacking who? Drop your iron, Blackie!"

It was a gamble, for a second, whether Devoe would risk another shot and risk hurting the stallion. He decided not to. Letting his revolver fall, he bawled for help.

"He's got me covered and he can't shift! Everybody in!"

But the posse didn't come smashing into the woods. There was more commotion out there, more voices were raised. Tray grinned as he heard Singing Slater swearing.

"Devil brand ye with a pitchfork! What's this rowing on our range?"

More clatter and confusion. The deputy was explaining: "I'd never laid eyes on the fancy critter until your cub went outa town like a bat outa hell, and this Devoe feller come a-hollering. Well, I knowed the rider was a B Star hand. Nat'rally I reckoned you old he-wolves was at your old tricks—mebbe training new blood!"

Brindle answered that. "You know better, ye grayback coyote! Bygones is bygones, and we're all re-formed. We raise our own now! The kid never lifted no horse. Or if he did, he had a reason—likely needed a good one."

Better add a word, Tray thought. "Would a rustler slope off like I did?" he shouted. "With a whole town watching?" He held his gun steady and wondered what was going to happen.

He didn't have long to wait. The wrangling and arguing broke off because everybody was listening to a single set of hoofs that was coming at the gallop. Coming hard and fast, closer and closer.

Another newcomer. The deputy, astonished and relieved, identified him.

"Glory be, it's the sheriff himself! Dunno how come he's here, but I'm sure glad! He'll take a hold now. Settle the mess pronto!"

A few minutes more, and a mounted man rode into the timber. Tray saw him come, saw him bend under branches as he kneed his horse forward, probing the woods with sharp, cold eyes. He was a solid chunk with a rocky face. The star on his vest was big and bright. His guns were big and black.

The game was up. Tray wasn't fool enough to fight any sheriff. He kept Blackie covered and waited.

The sheriff holstered his two Colt Peacemakers, swung tiredly down his mount. He glanced at the stallion, but didn't seem to notice Tray Grady at all. Instead he tramped over to Blackie.

"Stick 'em out!" he growled.

Slowly Devoe stretched his hands. A chain rattled, a pair of cuffs snapped shut.

At last the Law swung around to Tray. The Law was nodding, looking satisfied. "Good enough!" he said. "You saved me some bother. I been on the go for three days a'ready."

They moved out of the timber. Devoe first, the sheriff next, leading his horse. Tray came last, the stallion's head over his shoulder, wondering all the harder now.

ABOUT thirty men were there in the open. Some still sat their saddles, others had dismounted and were squatting on their heels. They were wondering, too. The Law's arrival had thrown them for a loss!

Slater and Brindle came over to slap Tray on the back. "Keep your chin up!" they encounraged. "None of them chumps brought a rope—and they sure as hell ain't a-gonna use ourn!"

The old deputy stepped to the stallion with a halter ready. He squinted at the sheriff, silently questioning.

The sheriff shook his head. "I don't want the kid. Got my man."

He spoke to Tray. "You're lucky, young feller, helping me make a haul. Why, this here animal is Whitring's best stud! Know what his name is? Silver Sultan of the Sunrise! He came from Arabia, 'way across the ocean, and you wouldn't believe how many thousands the judge paid for him."

Tray gaped. The best he could do was murmur, "Is that a fact?"

The Law chuckled, his hard face changing wonderfully. "S'pose you come to the deputy's office in town—say tomorrow—and talk business. There's a consid'able reward for you and me to split."

Come to town! Tray had said he never wanted to see the place again. But that was a while back; he felt better now. He tried to imagine the reward. Would it be a hundred dollars? Or a thousand? Somehow he could only think of a girl named Evie.

"Sure, I'll come," he said. "Got business at the store, anyway."

Then of course Singing Slater had to sling his hat in the air and yowl:

"Oh, my bronco's mane is the Milky Way,
It streams across the skies!
His tail sweeps off the mountain tops,
An' he's got two moons for eyes!"

NEXT ISSUE: GUNS FOR GERONIMO — *WATCH FOR IT!*

INCHYLODDY

By SYL MacDOWELL

John Dough was a culinary genius at the cookstove, but something was cooking that the town didn't expect!

SHERIFF Hawley took one look at his lean, troubled visitor. Then he creaked back in his desk chair, clapped a hand to his balding brow and slowly slid it down over his face as though to wipe out an unpleasant vision.

"No!" he groaned. "No, not again!"

The other man sidesaddled the sheriff's table desk with one long leg.

"What you hollering about?" he said gloomily. "It's me that's stuck, trying to run Rocking R without a cook."

The sheriff heaved a sigh of patient resignation.

"All right, Gene, let's have it. What happened to the last one?"

Gene Reeves, toying with a paperweight, gave a disconsolate shrug.

"What happened to all the others? When it ain't one thing it's another. I figured I was lucky when I got that fancy cook called Frenchy. Such puddings and cakes I never did taste the likes of. He ordered flavoring extract by the case and I couldn't account for the way the stuff disappeared until—"

"Until he turned out to be a vanilla drunk. I remember."

"After him, Ole Olson. Salt codfish and always cinnamon in the fried potatoes. Cowhands balk at gruesome grub like that. Then came Quong, who rendered out rattlesnake oil in the warming oven for his rheumatism. That and other heathenish practices the boys stood for, until Buck Wiggins took down with some mysterious belly misery and swore he was pizened by dried toadstools in the chop suey. Then the whole blamed outfit threatened to pull out on me if I didn't fire Quong."

"Myself, I'm fonder of mushrooms the second day," grimaced Sheriff Hawley. "Deafy Jones took over next, didn't he?"

REEVES grimaced, then repressed a shudder.

"Him and his chilblains. And his habit of soaking his sore feet in the dishpan, which produced another mutiny. I even tried females, two in a row. Vangie, she up and married the best foreman I ever had, Hank Long, and I lost 'em both. Mrs. Murphy honored us right after that. Neat as a pin, she was, and even sharper if one of the boys failed to broom off his boots before entering the cookshack. The blow-up came when she tried to wean 'em off coffee and onto tea, boiled tea, Irish style. Anyhow, who ever heard of women cooks on a roundup, Bill?"

"That makes seven in about a year," said Sheriff Hawley, tallying them off on his fingers. "Eight, counting Alabaster Mapes."

"The hash-slingin', psalm-singin' ace of spades, he called himself," mused Gene Reeves.

"A topnotch jail cook and a cheerful cuss to have around, I claim."

"Yeah. He shined at fried chicken, Southern style. Only trouble was, mighty little white meat got past him and onto the table. Also, don't forget what landed him in this calaboose before I got hold of him. He gave the boys an expensive education, him and his trained dice."

A pensive silence fell between them, then Sheriff Hawley asked:

"Now what, Gene?"

The rancher ran a hand hesitantly across his chin.

"Well now, Bill, out-of-work ranch cooks don't run around in large droves, here in Rincon. I—I sort of hoped you'd help me out by—"

The sheriff rocked forward and slapped his desk.

"Nothing doing!" he objected. "Sure, I did Rocking R a favor a few times, cooping up a stray cook, then handing him over to you for going his drunk bail. But look, Gene. Sooner or later some smart, habeas corpsing lawyer will show up and malfeasance me plumb out of office. No, sir, from now on you rope your own pot wranglers. I don't aim to shanghai no more culinary talent for nobody!"

Reeves gave a despairing gesture and slid off the desk.

"There's a heap more to ranching than raising beef," he said heavily. "For an old single-footer like me, anyhow. I never had troubles like these when—when Martha was alive."

"Being married solves some problems," said the sheriff. "Some. Sorry, Gene."

Gene Reeves tilted his hat over his eyes and slogged out into the springtime warmth of the street. It was around noon time and there was a lunch counter a few doors down. He half turned, then thought better of it. He wouldn't feel right, feeding on the side with the Rocking R outfit scraping along for themselves, like they were. So he fingered the store list from a shirt pocket and crossed over to Willowby's. He bought and loaded the needed

supplies in the back of his buckboard, climbed in and dusted out of town behind a span of spirited young buckskins.

North of town the road to Rocking R angled across the railroad tracks, up where a switch siding led to the Rincon loading pens. The road humped sharply over the tracks, then dipped through a swale, where a patch of arrowweed and saltbrush screened a littered campspot under a lone, spindly cottonwood. It was a place inhabited at intervals by railroad hobos.

AT SOME scent or movement back there in the shade the buckskins suddenly shied. One of them leaped violently and came down with a leg across the tongue. As it struggled, the yoke strap broke. The tongue dropped and dragged on the ground. The buckboard cramped and all at once Reeves had more trouble than he could handle.

As the rig teetered, on the verge of turning over, a man burst through the fringe of arrowweed and sprang for the fractious buckskin. He got hold of the bit ring and with gentling words got the jumpy, quivering animal under control.

Gulping down the cusswords stuck in his throat, Reeves breathed:

"Looks like I owe you a heap of thanks!"

"My fault, I reckon. Yet the smell of my cooking never started a stampede before."

Reeves sized up the smiling stranger. He was only frying size, of no particular age, and had an enormous beak of a nose that seemed to have split his face a little in growing, leaving a deeply pucked brow above and a cleft chin below it. Reeves noticed something else that had escaped him in the excitement. Mingled with the sun-hot creosote scent of railroad ties was woodsmoke and the aroma of coffee and fry meat.

The little man with the big nose said politely:

"Now friend, if you'll anchor down this colt, I'll scare up something to mend this busted harness."

Reeves unloaded himself from the buckboard and took charge of the uneasy buckskin. The helpful character hustled back towards his camp and returned with a hank of haywire. Together they repaired the broken tongue strap. Reeves saw that the other wore fringed gauntlets. Here was a new one, a bum wearing gloves. He didn't remember that the little man had them on when he made his running grab of the horse.

They finished the patch-up job and snugged up the tongue. Reeves straightened and said:

"It happened on account of these critters are only half broke."

"I savvy how that is," the little man said with a wry, one-sided smile. "Sort of half broke myself."

Gene Reeves promptly fished out a crumpled dollar bill and offered it. The handy hobo flushed and backed away.

"No, I didn't mean it that way, friend. Hope that hold-back rigging stays together. *Adios.*"

At the edge of the arrowweed he paused and looked back.

"Might help cure that colt of shying to get a good look at whatever spooked him. Anyhow," he invited shyly, "it's chow-time and I'd be right pleased for you to stop and set with me."

"No, thanks," Reeves refused curtly.

"Sorry, friend. Sorry for myself, I reckon. It's at eating that a man alone feels lonesomest."

He said it with a wistful smile. Gene Reeves knew loneliness, too. Besides, he felt a little ashamed of his brusque turndown.

"Might use a slug of that coffee at that," he decided impulsively.

He led the buckskins into the shade and tied them to the cottonwood, wondering sheepishly what Sheriff Hawley would say if he saw him hobnobbing in a hobo camp. He folded his legs and squatted with back to the tree while his host turned over a beefsteak that sizzled on a battered piece of corrugated metal roofing that rested on rocks over smouldering embers.

"Just a touch overdone. But plenty for two, if you can go jungle grub," the little man urged.

Reeves sniffed hungrily.

"That's a new one, frying without a skillet," he remarked.

"Good as any charcoal broil, friend. Can manage a fair job of biscuits between two sheets of tin, with coals piled on top."

REEVES pried up his sweat-stuck hatband.

"Look here," he said abruptly, "d'you happen to be a cook?"

Little Bignose poured steaming coffee from a blackened lard pail into a tin can and set it in the rancher's reach.

"Reckon that's for you to say," he said.

He raked a potato out of the ashes, stabbed it with a sharp stick and put it beside the steak. He split it open with a pocket knife. It was well-browned though not charred, and mealy done to the middle. He halved the steak, then kicked an old packing crate between them and set the sheet of metal between them.

"All we're shy on is dishes," he chuckled. "Go to it."

He had the knack of making every move count. The simple competency of converting a piece of trashpile roofing into a stove, a cooking utensil, then a hot platter and serving table as well won Reeves' admiration.

"My say is, you've landed yourself a job, stranger," he blurted recklessly. "Sixty per and the run of Rocking R cookshack. How about it?"

The little man gave him a queer, oblique glance as he whittled off a bite of steak and raised it on the point of his knife. He still wore the gauntlets.

"That's a mighty flattering proposition, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Reeves. Gene Reeves. Might as well load your warbag in the rig."

Some two hours later, the two of them piled out of the buckboard in Rocking R ranchyard. And by the time breakfast was over next morning, the five-man outfit had put the stamp of approval on the new cook.

His sphere of authority soon widened. The bane of past cooks had been Danny Reeves, a noisy, freckled youngster of seven, who had included the cookshack in his unguided, rampaging activities.

"Now about the young one, if he bothers hustle him out," directed Reeves.

"Bother? I like having a kid around."

"Might change your mind about that," Danny's father said bleakly. "He's been a hard one to handle since his ma died. Something's got to be done, but I don't know what."

"Shucks, he's sort of like that buckskin, that's all," smiled the new cook. "Kids and colts, ones that are going to amount to anything, are bound to fight the bit at first. Danny and I, we'll get along."

And they did. The quietly capable stranger and the boy hit it off agreeably from the start.

With the gauntlets laid aside, Danny Reeves was the first to observe that all four fingers of the cook's right hand were off at the first joint, leaving awkward-looking stubs.

"How'd you get hurt, mister?" the boy demanded.

"It's a long story, Danny."

"Tell me about it."

"I had to grab a big, sharp knife."

"Why?"

"A bad hombre was all set to cut my throat with it."

"Gee! What happened then?"

"He didn't, as you can see. Anyhow, son, that shows you that a sharp knife is dangerous. So when you got any need for whittling, you come ask me, savvy?"

"Can you whittle out a willow whistle?"

"I sure can. After supper, we'll go down to the creek and pick us out a good piece of whistle wood. We'll have time if you help me out some now. How about fetching in some kindling from the woodpile?"

"Sure thing," said Danny.

AS THE days passed, the little man gradually took charge of the motherless boy. He managed him with the same simple efficiency that he ran Rocking R cookshack. Danny was with him almost constantly and the cook devised ingenious ways of entertaining him and keeping him busy. When Reeves marveled at it, he said:

"The thing is to help a boy work off steam, then he keeps out of mischief and learns something besides."

There were suckers and bullheads in a deep hole at the cutbank bend in the creek and the cook promised Danny he'd get some fishing tackle first trip to town. Reeves overheard.

"The boy's ma never let him go down there," he said. "Scared he'd drown."

The cook smiled mysteriously. "Don't fret yourself about that, boss."

The weather was warming rapidly and one bright afternoon he told Reeves that he and the boy had something to show him. Down past the corral and pasture they went to the creek.

At a wink from his friend, Danny stripped, splashed in and paddled around with yells of delight at his dad's surprise.

"Before summer's over, he'll be swimming like a frog," beamed the cook. "He learned fast. Danny won't drown, boss, you can bet on that."

Come payday, Gene Reeves called the cook up to his office corner in the living room of the ranchhouse.

"Come to think, you ain't mentioned your name," the rancher said. "How do I sign you on?"

"Shucks, a cook hasn't much use of a name."

"On his paycheck he has. I'm raising you to seventy, by the way."

"Thanks a heap, boss. Well, let's see. John D-o-u-g-h is as good a name as any for a cook, wouldn't you say?"

The disturbing realization that he had never heard the little man allude to his past came to the rancher. He had, himself, avoided mentioning the circumstances of their first meeting. He didn't want anybody to know that he had been so hard pressed to get a cook. He shook off his vague concern and said:

"Okay, if that's the way you want it."

So John Dough it became on Rocking R payroll. But the likeable little man with the big nose was never called that. It was not long before the punchers christened him with a more appropriate name.

Reeves entrusted him with the buckboard for a grub trip to Rincon. "John Dough" did not indulge in the ranch cook's time-honored privilege of a payday drunk, but returned that night cold sober. He brought, in addition to Danny's fishing tackle, an assortment of "fancy fixings" to vary the cookshack fare. One item was a string of dried chili peppers, not from Willowby's, but from section hands on the railroad.

With these he produced an epicurean novelty that made an immediate hit with the outfit. The dish was enchiladas, not rank imitations of the Mexican standby containing hot chili powder, but the genuine article painstakingly prepared from the rich, savory pulp of parched, parboiled, dried chilis, with plenty of cheese melted over the top.

The name was as much a novelty as the dish to Rocking R riders, who had no tongue for below-the-border lingo. They demanded more "inchyloddies." So the new cook became known as Inchyloddy and the nickname stuck.

In May, after calf-branding, Rocking R drove herd to summer range in the high mountains. Danny Reeves clamored to go along. With nobody remaining at the home ranch to care for him, Inchyloddy took the small boy under his wing in the cook-wagon for two rejoiceful weeks.

Inchyloddy had inexhaustible outdoor lore, so Danny learned many things and his eager young curiosity was whetted to learn more. He was fascinated one morning, at the breakfast campfire, by a flock of small birds that appeared suddenly out of nowhere.

They were about the size of linnets, with brown bodies, black wings and shiny black tufts and they hopped and twittered on a low quakenasp limb.

"What are they, Inchyloddy?" the boy asked. "Campbirds?"

THE COOK squinted at them. "Nope. They're cedar waxwings, sonny."

"That's a funny name for a bird."

"My guess is he made it up from some brand of furniture polish," said one of the punchers.

"We got something to feed 'em, Inchyloddy?"

"Doubt if they're hungry for flapjacks and such, Danny. They live on berries."

"What kind of berries?"

Inchyloddy pointed to a low thicket that was attracting the birds.

"Pyracantha berries, that grow on those bushes. The waxwings live on pyracantha as they migrate each spring clean from Mexico to Canada."

Reeves listened wonderingly.

"Don't you ever get tired answerin' his questions, Inchyloddy?"

"He's got me pumped about dry," grinned the cook. He turned serious. "What he needs is book learning."

"I know, I know," fretted Reeves. "He's of school age and past. I aim to send him down to Rincon next winter if I can get somebody to board and herd him."

The thoughtful crease between Inchyloddy's eyes deepened.

"Don't know as that's such a good thing, boss," he reflected.

"Why not? I can't let him grow up to be a empty-headed ignoramus."

"The cookshack wouldn't be a bad schoolroom."

"And get somebody to teach him, you mean?"

"Reckon that's not necessary. I got a little past the first grade."

"Well," Reeves faltered, "that's mighty handsome of you, Inchyloddy. I'll think it over."

Back at the ranch, Inchyloddy harnessed up the buckskins for a supply trip. As he drove from the corral, he hauled back on the reins and called out:

"My gloves, Danny. They're on the stand by my bed. How about fetchin' 'em?"

The boy ran through the cookshack to the cook's leanto bedroom. He had his own hands pushed into the gauntlets when he came out, and that led to a discovery.

"Gee, you got the empty fingers in one glove stuffed with something," he piped. "What for, Inchyloddy?"

For the first time, the cook gave a cranky answer.

"Never mind about that. Just hand 'em here."

He pulled on the fringed gauntlets. The stuffed fingers seemed real, concealing his injury. He drove off. Reeves, watching him go, turned to Roy Gibbons, an extra puncher hired for the summer.

"Funny, but the one thing he's touchy about is that bum hand."

Gibbons' black eyes slitted in his heavy, swarthy face.

"Yeah, that and other things."

"What you drivin' at?"

"I rode for a border outfit out of El Paso last winter, and when I asked him where he got his chili savvy he closed up tight as a bull's ear in flytime."

"That's nothing against a man, as I see it," Reeves said defensively.

"He talks plenty, but never about himself. Ever notice that?"

"No," Reeves lied. "What he does speaks for itself, anyhow, and that's enough for me."

"Okay, okay," grunted Gibbons.

Inchyloddy returned later than usual. Besides the usual load of supplies, he brought a small cloth satchel, with something heavy in it.

"For you, Danny," he said.

The boy dug into it enthusiastically. Then his face fell.

"Gosh, books!" he said disgustedly. "Just books!"

"That's right. Lesson books."

Reeves burst out with:

"Where'n creation you get hold of these, Inchyloddy?"

"Had a palaver with the schoolma'am down at Rincon."

"I'd rather have a saddle, a real boy's saddle," complained Danny.

"All right then, I'll tell you what," proposed Inchyloddy. "Soon as we can show your Dad that you can read some, I'll get you that saddle."

DANNY'S interest in the schoolbooks took an immediate upturn.

"Will you?" he shrilled. "Gee, that's swell! How long does it take to learn how to read, Inchyloddy? About a week?"

"A good bit longer than that, sonny. Depends on how hard you study. Anyhow, the schoolma'am sent something

else. Sort of a present for you and me, both. It's under the buckboard seat. Handle it easy."

Danny scampered out, returning with a small wicker basket with a handle and a hasp lid. Inchyloddy sat on a bench and opened it. A sleepy, half-grown kitten yawned up at them.

Danny yelped delightedly. Inchyloddy laughed.

"It'll get some schooling, too, as it grows up. In mouse catching, here around the cookshack."

The kitten soon accustomed itself to its new home and was a source of entertainment as Danny delved into the first reader and Inchyloddy made a small black-board and nailed it to the cookshack wall.

Inchyloddy had planted a row of petunias by the wash-bench in front of the drab, slab-sided building. On sunny days, as summer waned, the kitten played in the bright-colored blooms. Because it was so attracted to the flowers, Inchyloddy named it Mariposa.

"That means 'butterfly' in Mex lingo," he told Danny.

Mariposa was amusing, affectionate and afraid of nothing. One day, as the outfit finished dinner, it leaped onto Roy Gibbons' lap.

The extra puncher had just lighted a cigarette. With a malicious grin he thrust the match, still aflame, at the trustful kitten's nose. With a hurt mew, it jumped down and fled for its basket in back of the stove.

Inchyloddy was clearing the table when that happened. He had a stack of dishes on his left arm. He stood behind the boss. Reeves wore what he called his "varmint gitter," a revolver holstered at his left hip.

Inchyloddy's maimed right hand dipped down, then came up and blasted across the table. It was back in Reeves' holster as quickly as it had come out.

Gibbons dazedly plucked the cigarette from his lips, just the bullet-clipped stub that was left and stared at it in stunned awe. Inchyloddy still had the dishes balanced on his left arm. Lights flickered like heat lightning in his gray-blue eyes but his voice sounded calm and emotionless.

"Reckon I've got sort of clumsy on the trigger reach. Aimed to singe your whiskers, cowboy, like you singed Mariposa's."

Gene Reeves sucked in a deep breath and blinked incredulously.

"I don't see no need to apologize," he said shakenly. "That is, not for that kind of shooting."

That was all that was said. Gibbons ducked. He drew his time that afternoon, snowbirded south and was seen no more at Rocking R.

Not many days later, Danny Reeves was taken suddenly sick. Inchyloddy hurried up to the ranchhouse when the boy's father told him. He found the youngster in bed, burning with fever.

"It's no trifling ailment, boss," he told Reeves somberly. "Reckon you better get a doc, *muy pronto*."

Reeves dashed for Rincon and returned with old Doc Holloway. He examined the patient briefly. His face was set and grim as he shook down his thermometer.

"Typhoid," he said.

"What's to be done?" Reeves demanded.

"Not much can be done, Gene. If he's to pull through, it'll take constant, careful nursing. Day and night."

"Who—who can I get?"

DOC Holloway wagged his shaggy head. "Nobody in town I can recommend. Nobody."

Inchyloddy spoke up. "I'll tend him, Doc."

"But man alive, it takes experience to—"

"Just you tell me what to do, how to do it and what to look out for. Reckon I'm as fitten as any outsider, as any called-in help."

Doc Holloway gave him a searching look. Long years of country practice had given him insight and understanding.

This man's anguished concern was genuine, he could see that. He glanced at Reeves. Reeves nodded. Doc Holloway gave orders and left.

On the road back to town, he passed

Sheriff Hawley, headed for Rocking R. When the sheriff reached the ranch, Danny's cot had been moved down to Inchyloddy's room, adjoining the cookshack, where he could be in constant attendance.

The sheriff beckoned Reeves outside.

"This new hash hawk of yours, Gene," he began bluntly. "Who is he? Where'd he come from?"

Raw-nerved and worried, Reeves' temper snapped.

"A fine time this is to hen around over that small fuss he had with Gibbons!" he flared. "Who told you, anyhow?"

"A thing like that's bound to spread, Gene. Such gun handiness don't come to a man by accident, like a lucky poker draw. And for a ranch cook with a crippled hand to pull off such a stunt is downright uncommon. But that ain't what brings me."

"Then what does? Nobody complained, nobody got hurt!"

"Here's what brings me, Gene."

The sheriff handed over a thin envelope. It was addressed to him. It was stamped Bisbee, Arizona.

Reeves took out the enclosure. The sinister significance of it seeped into him as he read. It was a wanted bulletin, describing an undersized fugitive known as Eaglebeak Kane, sought in connection with a holdup at the Border Land & Cattle Company headquarters. The culprit had been bloodily wounded in the right hand in a getaway fracas with a machete-swinging vaquero, in which the vaquero had been killed.

The date on it, Reeves saw next.

"Why, this squawk is two years old!" he spat contemptuously.

"Two years don't outlaw murder, Gene."

"Who sent it?"

"Nothing to show, except the postmark."

Reeves inspected the handwriting on the envelope. His face darkened with anger.

"Roy Gibbons' scrawl! So he dug it up! Workin' out his grudge in wild guesswork!"

"He guessed right, Gene. I want Inchyloddy."

The trouble-ridden rancher raised his stricken eyes to the sheriff's hard, resolute face. Then he took a quick step, blocking the cookshack doorway just as Hawley moved to enter. He stood there, erect and defiant.

"We been friends for years, Gene," said the sheriff. "Does this killer mean more to you?"

Reeves' hand crept towards his six-gun.

"Right now, Bill, he means everything. You're not taking him."

Without further warning, the sheriff hurled his whole weight at his challenger and grabbed for his gun. They both grabbed for it. But there was a darting movement back inside and the holster was empty. They staggered apart from the impact of their clash and saw Inchyloddy, the weapon in his stub-fingered hand.

"Pull in your horns, Sheriff," he said tonelessly. "I'm your man. But I'm not ready to go with you, not yet."

Hawley, breathing hard, lowered his battling glare to the menacing gun. His own .45 was under his coat. The look in the cook's face warned him not to go for it.

REEVES said evenly: "See it our way, Bill. Without Inchyloddy, my boy's chances are slim. It's for Danny's sake he's staying."

"I'm not pulling out so long as the kid needs me, Sheriff," the cook promised. "When the time comes, I'll be here, waiting."

"You expect me to take your word on that?" blustered Hawley. But he was licked and he knew it.

Relief flooded Reeves' tense face.

"Leave it to Doc Holloway's say-so, Bill," he pleaded. "If—when he says Danny's out of danger, come then and get your man. I'll guarantee his promise."

"Next time," gritted Hawley. "I'll have a warrant."

He turned and trudged for his horse.

That battle ended. But the fight for Danny's life was a longer, harder one. For two harrowing, uncertain weeks Inchy-

loddy hovered over the boy, bathing and tending him with the tenderness of a woman.

Danny lay in delirium as the crisis approached and lamplight shone the long nights through in the cookshack. Inchyloddy turned hollow-eyed and haggard from strain and sleeplessness, but his devotion was unwavering and he never despaired, even when Doc Holloway saw no hope.

Came at last a night when the dark angel's wings brushed low over the small, wasted body. The flame of life flickered feebly as the crisis came. Gene Reeves looked in the sickroom during that agonizing suspense and saw Inchyloddy knelt by the cot, hands clasped in prayer.

In the small hours the fever broke. Danny was conscious next morning. He greeted his Dad with a weak smile and a whisper of recognition.

When Doc Holloway came that day and saw the change in his patient, he marveled.

"It's a miracle! Good care is all that pulled him through. Good care means even more, from now on."

The upturn was rapid. Danny's returning appetite was ravenous, but the Doc gave strict orders to dole out nourishment in pitifully small portions. Excess food could bring on a fatal relapse.

The willows were yellowing along the creek and the first frost nipped Mariposa's petunias. Danny could sit up now, for short intervals, and Inchyloddy's ingenuity was taxed for ways to entertain him and boundless patience was needed to calm the boy's fr nt hunger tantrums.

As he gained strength, he was allowed to get up.

"Just for a few minutes at first, mind you," Doc Holloway said.

Unable to stand alone, Danny wept as his wobbly legs folded. Inchyloddy lifted him gently back in bed.

"Cheer up, chico, you'll soon learn to walk again. Soon you'll be settin' at table, eating man-sized rations."

"Then I can study again?"

"Sure, right soon."

"Remember that saddle you promised me, Inchyloddy?"

"Sure do, sonny. Soon as you can read some. That'll be along about Christmastime, I expect, with the start you've had."

Days hurried past like fluttering autumn leaves, Danny was dressed, up and about, then came that fateful one, the day of rejoicing—and dread. Sheriff Hawley rode out to Rocking R with the doctor in his buggy.

"Danny's well, the Doc says," he told Reeves, "and I've got that warrant from Bisbee."

Reeves' eyes blurred when he wrote "John Dough's" last paycheck. It was for a whopping amount.

"You'll need it for lawyer hire and such," he said huskily as he thrust it into Inchyloddy's hand. "Keep us posted."

THE leavetaking was an excruciating ordeal. Danny had not been told that Inchyloddy was going, or why. But intuitively he knew they were parting forever.

"Don't go, please don't go!" he wailed as he clung to his friend.

"Look, Danny," gulped Inchyloddy. "It's a promise I made, like the promise of a saddle I made to you, savvy? A man can't go back on his word. Some day your Dad, he'll explain everything."

Reeves had arranged for the sheriff to take his prisoner to town in the buckboard and it was waiting and ready. Inchyloddy loaded his warbag and got aboard. Danny sobbed and waved goodby as the buckskins made for Rincon.

Sheriff Hawley found conversation strained and difficult.

"They'll be wanting to know if you have the money you got in that holdup," he remarked.

Inchyloddy said:

"Not a dime, Sheriff."

"Stashed it, huh?"

"No. Half went to the man it rightfully belonged to. The other half, around five thousand, to the family of that buckaroo guard that tried to halt me."

Hawley gave the small, sad man a skeptical sideglance.

"You mean to say you pulled a robbery,

just to give all the loot away?"

"Reckon you don't know how the Border Land and Cattle outfit got hold of the range they claim, do you, Sheriff?"

"How?"

"They stole it, that's how. In a crooked land deal. Most of it belonged to Don Roberto Sanchez, who was my boss and best friend. I was his major domo. Don Roberto fought the big, rich company till he was flat busted, homeless. Sick, down and out."

"So your holdup was to even things up, is that it?"

"It was justice, as I saw it. I've already paid some on account for the crime—if you want to call it that."

He held out his maimed hand to show what he meant.

"That finished me for the work I knew and had always done. So I turned out to be a cook. And for that machete-swinging buckaroo, he was a small loss. A bad hombre, he was, who helped trick Don Roberto. In fact, his lyin' in court lost Don Roberto his case. And his Lazy S."

Bill Hawley ran a hand over his face and stared straight ahead. "Sometimes," he said feelingly, "I wish I never'd got elected sheriff. I don't mind admittin' that this is one of those times, Inchyloddy."

They reached the dip and the hobo camp by the railroad tracks. Ever since their first scare, the buckskins had been spooky in passing this place. Today, their behavior was worsened by the approach of a freight train, picking up speed as it rumbled past Rincon. As it approached the road crossing, the engine whistled.

The buckskins went in the air, then bolted for the track crossing. They had the bits in their teeth and were unmanageable.

The engine was only a few yards away. With the momentum of the long train behind it, brakes were hopeless. The white, agonized face of the fireman was at the cab window. A gruesome crash seemed inevitable. Only one thing to do. Inchyloddy did it.

He seized one rein and sawed at it with the strength of desperation. The fear-crazed team swung. The buckboard cramped, flinging the two men beside the massive driving wheels of the engine as it rumbled past the crossing.

The little man leaped nimbly to his feet and made a running leap for the train. He grasped a ladder rung, swung bodily for a precarious instant, then hauled himself safely aboard.

Bill Hawley scrambled onto an elbow, snaked out his gun and sighted carefully. He smirked with secret satisfaction as he emptied his gun, not at the fugitive but wide and low, along the rails.

Weeks later, he received in the mail a copy of an Arizona newspaper, with a Page One spread telling about the Federal grand jury indictment of the Border Land & Cattle Company on charges of land fraud.

He rode out to Rocking R, to show it to Gene Reeves. There was snow on the ground, because it was the dead of winter now.

Reeves had news, too. But he decided that it was just as well not to mention it. A few days before, just at Christmastime, Danny had received from somewhere in Mexico a handsome, silver-mounted boy's saddle.

DON'T MISS THIS NOVEL!

DESERT OF THE DAMNED

The shockingly realistic story of a far-from-perfect cowboy who wanted to pull one "last" stage-robbery

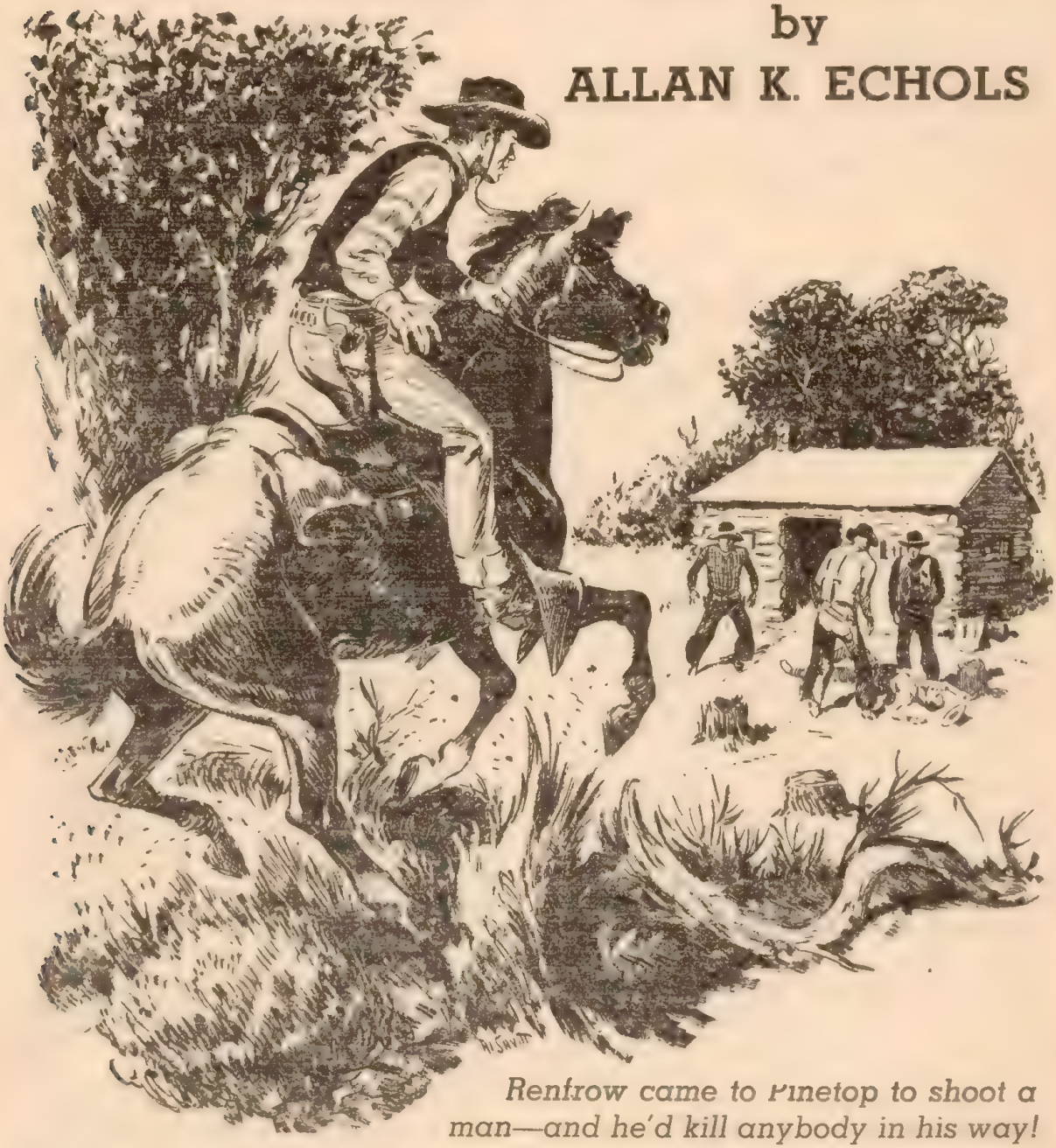
by NELSON NYE

Featured in POPULAR WESTERN for April **On Sale Now—Only 25c!**

WHEN THE FOG LIFTED

by

ALLAN K. ECHOLS



Renfrow came to Pinetop to shoot a man—and he'd kill anybody in his way!

ANGER at Gault had been smoldering in him during the last three years. It had reached a point where Renfrow had come to feel that nothing would bring him relief, except to kill his former friend. Now he was high in the hills of the Territory, and somewhere before him, not very far, Gault had his ranch—and Martha.

He rode into a settlement called Pinetop on the mountainside, where he bought sardines and crackers, and asked directions to Gault's place.

"Just follow the trail another seven

miles to where it turns off downhill," the gray old storekeeper answered. "Pretty place. Only whitewashed house in these parts," he added, and turned back to another man with whom he had been talking.

Renfrow sat on the counter and speared his sardines with the point of his knife. A word in the men's conversation caught his attention, and he stopped crunching the cracker in his mouth.

"Holden might be biting off more than he can chew," the storeman was saying. "This fellow Gault don't strike me as being easy to kill."

The other man had his air of importance. "I don't know," he said gravely. "When Max lays off to get a man, he'll mighty near get him."

Renfrow put in a word. "What's this Holden got against Gault?" he asked with a surface casualness.

The little man wanted to spread his news. "Holden is Westover's foreman, and Gault is in Westover's way. That's enough, ain't it?"

"I wouldn't know," Renfrow answered between bites of cracker. "Is it enough?"

"Wait and see, stranger. Westover is a rancher who makes big tracks and he needs lots of room. It's just that simple. You'll see if you stick around."

"I might do that. Where could I find this Holden?" Renfrow slid off the counter and adjusted his gunbelt around his lean hips.

"If he ain't already set out for Gault's, then he's likely down around the livery with the boys. You ain't thinking of taking a hand, are you?"

"Why, yes," Renfrow answered gravely, "I am."

The man seemed to regret his long flow of speech. "You figuring on trying to stop him?"

"I might."

"Oh," the man gulped. "You a friend of Gault's?"

"No!"

"Then why?"

Renfrow shrugged. "What does it matter?" He left the store and rode his horse down the street.

Half a dozen men sat in the shade of the livery stable and watched him with their natural suspicion of strangers. He dismounted at the blacksmith shop next door and left his horse to have a thrown shoe replaced.

Then he walked on down to the livery, a lean man with a tanned face which seemed to have forgotten how to smile, and with gray eyes that seemed to look through their apparent focus of attention. He came into position before the men so that all of them were spread out on the two benches before him.

"Looking for Max Holden," he said.

A heavy man with a purple-veined face and sun-bleached eyebrows answered him.

"I'm Holden. What's on your mind?"

"I hear it around that you're gunning for Lane Gault."

HOLDEN, who had been sitting with his arms folded, now straightened up. "A man hears a lot of things around here. I don't seem to recognize you."

"Name's Renfrow. You probably never heard of me."

"No, I reckon I haven't. I was wondering about your interest in my business."

"My interest is not in you," Renfrow answered. "It's in Gault. You can forget about going after him. No objections?"

The heavy man with sun-bleached eyebrows dusted his hands and got to his feet as though facing a job that was annoying but which had to be done.

"Yes," he repeated again. "I believe I have got some objections. If I want to kill Lane Gault, that comes under the head of my own business."

"Or the business Westover is paying you to do."

"What's wrong with that, stranger?"

"A damned paid killer," Renfrow spat. "A man that kills for money is lower than a coyote. Don't you think so?"

"Friend," Max Holden said, "I don't know what makes you want to die so young, but that's up to you."

Holden was moving as he spoke, moving swiftly for one so big. He had dropped into a crouch, and his hand was streaking for his gun.

He was too late. Renfrow's weapon had already cleared leather and roared. Holden's bullet went into the ground. His body jolted, his mouth remained open in a ludicrous expression while he tottered a moment. Then he fell forward.

Renfrow stood over him, his face lean and somehow sad, and looked down on Holden until he knew the man was dead. Then his eyes swept bleakly over the stunned men sitting silently on the bench.

"Friends of his?" he asked.

Nobody accepted the challenge. Renfrow pouched his weapon. One of the men looked at him speculatively, then offered a statement, and observed how Renfrow reacted to it.

"He was Westover's foreman. That's Westover coming over from the saddle shop."

Renfrow turned his gaze to a big man in a white hat who strode along as if he owned the mountains.

"I'll be at the blacksmith shop if anybody wants to see me," Renfrow said to the man on the bench.

He found the blacksmith almost finished shoeing his horse. The smithy looked up worriedly at him, said, "That'll be half a dollar," then bowed his head over the job of clinching the last nails in the horse's hoof.

Renfrow put a coin on a corner of the forge. The smith dropped the animal's hoof and straightened up. His eyes picked up Westover as the big man came diagonally across the street toward the livery stable.

"Want to take your horse outside to the tie rack?" he asked.

Renfrow smiled tightly and led his horse out to the water trough. His animal had not finished drinking when Westover, having stopped for a moment's talk at the stable, came up to him. The eyes in the big man's heavy face were china blue, and they boldly swept Renfrow as though he were a stray steer.

Renfrow returned the gaze a moment, then asked, "You want to see me?"

The big man rubbed his thick chin. "Yes, I do, Mister. What are you doing around here?"

"That is my business, friend."

"You made it mine when you killed one of my men. What did you do it for?"

"To keep him from killing me."

"That's not the way I heard it. You came looking for him, and you badgered him into a fight. Why?"

"Somebody told you wrong. He drew on me, and I shot him."

"They say at the store that you are here to see Lane Gault. Are you a friend of his?"

"No—if it's anything to you."

"But you killed my man to keep him away from Gault. Why?"

"You wouldn't understand that," Renfrow answered.

He saw the puzzlement on Westover's face. Then the big man looked at him speculatively. "I ought to kill you for gunning Holden down. I needed him. But I think I've got your number. You killed him because you're gunning for Gault yourself, and you didn't want anybody to beat you to the job. That's it, huh?"

"Again I've got to tell you that that is my private business."

WESTOVER shrugged, then came to a decision. "All right, it's your business. But I can make it worth your while." He watched for the reaction on Renfrow's face, but saw none. He added, "You're going to kill the man anyway. I'll pay you well for making sure you do a good job of it."

Westover was pulling out a roll of bills when Renfrow hit him. He went over backwards into the water trough and the roll of bills scattered in the mud around it.

Renfrow stepped back. Westover pulled himself up and stood rubbing his chin, his clothes dripping, his face wet and flushed with a rage that made him speechless.

Renfrow was gathering up his bridle reins when Westover got his voice and said, "You'd better get your business around here done in a hurry. I lay eyes on you again, and you're as good as dead, Mister."

"Now?" Renfrow asked, his eyes going to the gun in Westover's wet holster.

Westover shrugged off the challenge impatiently and started across the street.

Renfrow rode out the mountain trail without looking back. It was hot, and there was dust in his mouth. There was a fog in his mind, where old bitter memories mixed again with the raw and queer emotions which always stirred in him when he killed a man. For the men he had killed lived on—standing between him and Martha. As Lane Gault doubtless would do.

But the killing of men had brought him no peace. Instead, the killings had sickened him the more. They had only confused his thought and left him bitter, convinced that there was no peace for any man, though it were bought with the gun.

He rode along the trail which followed the foot of the mountain and came, after a while, to a point where it led down off the bench. As he came out of the trees and faced the prairie, he saw a small cluster of buildings—barns, corrals and outhouses. In the middle of this was the long, low ranch house, made of chinked cottonwood poles and whitewashed so that it stood dazzling in the shade of a big sycamore tree in the afternoon sun.

Renfrow pulled his horse up under the tree and took his time rolling a cigarette and smoking it. Here before him lay a snug home in a rich land, and in it was the man who had been his friend, and the woman who should have been his wife. The palms of his hands were sweating now.

He called out and dismounted. Then Martha was at the door, her deep blue eyes wide with some emotion which she quickly tried to conceal.

She looked more mature now, and he saw that she would soon be having a child. It struck Renfrow that much of her beauty and zest for life had fled before an attitude of petulant resignation. She seemed a stranger to him.

"Jim!" The word came with a catch of her breath, and then she was silent. Her face became a mask.

"Hello, Martha." Renfrow answered. "Is Lane around?"

Searching his face, she countered with a question of her own. "What did you want to see him about?"

"I wanted to see him."

She swept the prairie with an uneasy look. "He's not here," she said.

"Where is he?"

"He's out somewhere. I don't know when he'll be back."

"I'll wait," Renfrow said, and there followed a moment of awkward silence.

Then she seemed to pull herself together. "You've come to kill Lane, haven't you, Jim?" It sounded cold and brutal coming thus bluntly from her lips, but they both knew it for the truth.

"What should I do, congratulate him?"

"No. You should wake up. I told you before you went away on your last killing expedition, that I wouldn't be waiting when you came back. But you were too sure of yourself, too sure of me. And you laughed at me and went out to do your killing."

"You talk like I am some hired gun hand."

"Well, weren't you? Didn't you hire your guns out to your uncle and to Dave Shepherd?"

"I helped them defend their homes."

"But you were fighting for money. You had hatred in your heart. I can understand your hating land hogs, because one of them killed your family. That's one thing. But using that as an excuse for killing other men is something else again. Jim, you can't see the difference between the real reason you do a thing and the excuse you make to justify the act."

THIS talk was strange to him, just as the Martha who stood before him was a stranger to him. "I don't see your

point," he answered.

"This is the point, Jim. I told you that I couldn't love a man who nursed bitterness in his heart as you persisted in doing. Lane didn't say a word to me about how he felt toward me until after I'd told him that I was not going to marry you. He didn't take me away from you, because I didn't belong to you. I married him because I wanted to. That hurt your pride, and so you've trailed us so that again you can kill a man and feed your own bitterness."

"So I'm just another skunk."

"No, Jim. You're all right, except for being touchy. But pride has poisoned your life, and I didn't intend to have it poison mine. We've got trouble enough here. Go away, please, Jim. Let us alone."

A gradually rising hysteria overpowered her control. She suddenly flung her hands up to her face and ran back into the house. Renfrow saw her throw herself onto the sofa and bury her head in her arms. All at once he felt a great pity for her. He followed her into the front room and dragged a chair to the couch. He put his hand on her head and spoke softly.

"Hush now, Martha. You're all upset. What's all this trouble you're having, anyway?"

Between her sobs, she said, "Get me one of those tablets on the table and a glass of water, please."

The medicine and his own efforts to quiet her had brought her gradually to a point where she seemed to have fallen into sleep, when he heard the sound of someone coming into the house from the rear.

He was still sitting in the chair beside the sleeping Martha when he looked up and saw a young woman who had the same features as Martha's—the same black curly hair, and the same deep blue eyes. She was dressed in levis and wore a blue shirt opened at the neck. Her face was flushed with emotion, and there was a look of fear and puzzlement in her eyes as she looked from him to the woman on the couch.

Then Renfrow recognized Martha's younger sister. Sally Woodruff had been just a child the last time he had seen her. Now her fully developed figure filled her levis and blue shirt. She was a perfect replica of the Martha of only a few years ago.

The girl recognized Renfrow at the same time, and said, "Hello, Jim." Her voice was guarded. "What's the matter with Martha?"

"She got a touch of nerves. I gave her one of those tablets."

The girl came across the room hurriedly and laid her hand on her sister's head. "Martha hasn't been feeling well lately," she answered.

She swept the room with a quick nervous glance, then went and lifted a deer rifle off a pair of cow horns over the fireplace. Then with a motion of her head, she signaled for Renfrow to follow her.

Puzzled, Renfrow went out into the backyard with her, where he caught a glimpse of a saddled horse, frothed with sweat.

The girl looked at him with a searching eye. She had not been cordial in her greeting, and now there was suspicion in her words. "What did you come here for?"

"Why," Renfrow answered, "I wanted to see Lane."

"They've been expecting you ever since they've been here. If you were coming at all, why did you wait? Just to torture them?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Listen, Jim. I'm not a child. You love Martha. She has been afraid you'd look them up and make trouble for them. And now you're here."

"Forget it," he said.

There was a troubled earnestness in her voice. "Listen, please, Jim. You liked me when I was a kid. You used to say you'd do anything in the world for me—"

"Yes," Renfrow smiled. "I used to swear that I was going to wait till you grew up, and then marry you—"

SHE interrupted impatiently. "Then do something for me now."

"All right. What's the trouble?"

"Some men have got Lane pinned down at a line shack out on Willow Creek. He's standing them off with his pistol, but he can't last long. Will you help?"

"Sure. Why didn't you say so before? Let's go."

"I had to find out first if you'd be willing to help. I'm glad Martha won't know about it. Let's get going."

"How were you going to explain coming after that rifle?" Renfrow asked as they mounted and rode out of the yard.

"I was going to tell her I'd seen a deer. We need meat."

They nosed their horses along a trail paralleling the foot of the mountain.

"Westover making the trouble?" Renfrow asked.

"His men. You know him?"

"Met him in town. What's he got against Lane?"

"Nothing, except that Lane's in his way."

"This is a pretty big range."

"All this land belongs to the Indians, and everybody leases his rights from the Indian Agency. Recently the government has decided that they'll allow the land to be sold, and the preference will go to the people who are on it and have improved it. Westover is a mountain man but he needs prairie in the spring and summer, and he has to cross Lane's land to get to prairie range. Lane's land lies along the foot of the ridge. If he buys up and fences it, then he cuts Westover off from the prairie. If Lane is not on his land when the sale is held, then Westover can take it all in without competition. He is trying to see that Lane is not around when the land goes up for sale."

"That's pretty raw, killing a man without excuse."

"Oh, he's made an excuse. His cattle and ours both water at Willow Creek. That's the dividing line between the two ranges. Westover is claiming that Lane

[*Turn page*]

AUDELS Carpenters and Builders Guides 4 vols. $6

Inside Trade Information for Carpenters, Builders, Joiners, Building Mechanics and all Woodworkers. These Guides give you the short-cut instructions that you want—including new methods, ideas, solutions, plans, systems and money saving suggestions. An easy progressive course for the apprentice and student. A practical daily helper and Quick Reference for the master worker. Carpenters everywhere are using these Guides as a Helping Hand to Easier Work, Better Work and Better Pay. To get this assistance for yourself, simply fill in and mail FREE COUPON below.

Inside Trade Information On:

How to use the steel square—How to file and set saws—How to build furniture—How to use a mitre box—How to use the chalk line—How to use rules and scales—How to make joints—Carpenters arithmetic—Solving mensuration problems—Estimating strength of timbers—How to set girders and sills—How to frame houses and roofs—How to estimate costs—How to build houses, barns, garages, bungalows, etc.—How to read and draw plans—Drawing up specifications—How to excavate—How to use settings 12, 13 and 17 on the steel square—How to build hoists and scaffolds—skylights—How to build stairs—How to put on interior trim—How to hang doors—How to lath—lay floors—How to paint.

AUDEL, Publishers, 49 W. 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

Mail Audels Carpenters and Builders Guides, 4 vols., on 7 days' free trial. If OK I will remit $1 in 7 days and $1 monthly until $6 is paid. —Otherwise I will return them. No obligation unless I am satisfied.

Name_____

Address_____

Occupation_____

Employed by_____ THR

High School Course at Home — **Many Finish in 2 Years**

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work — prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. H-458, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

Be a DETECTIVE

A CHALLENGE FROM WASHINGTON D.C.!

Help Stop Crime! Train at home. Earn big money. Amazing training course from the NATIONS CAPITOL (center of law enforcement) by former U.S. GOVT. AGENT and NAVAL INTELLIGENCE Officer exposes actual methods used by Criminals. Write for FREE BOOK. State age.

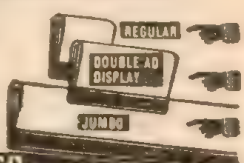
INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE SYSTEM

INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE TRAINING SCHOOL
1701 Monroe St., N.E. Dept. 354 Washington 18, D. C.

MAKE EXTRA MONEY

EVERY BUSINESS EVERYWHERE USES UNION LABEL BOOK MATCHES

No experience needed to earn big daily commissions. Be a direct factory representative of the world's largest exclusive UNION LABEL Book Match manufacturer. Prospects everywhere. Feature Glamour Girls, Hillbillies, scenics and dozens of other styles—Double Books—Jumbo Books—nearly 100 color combinations. New, bigger portfolio makes this fastest selling line a real profit maker for you. Write TODAY for full details.



SUPERIOR MATCH CO.
Dept. R-452, 7528 S. Greenwood Ave., Chicago 19, Illinois
West Coast Salesmen, write Box 1087, San Jose, Calif.

MEN! WHY BUY YOUR NEXT SUIT?
GET IT AS A BONUS
Make Big Cash Profits Besides
Easy to earn a stylish new suit—beautifully tailored to your measure—on our "Profit-Sharing" Bonus Plan. Also special bonus pants offer. All you do is show our beautiful fabrics and latest fashions to friends, and take their orders. Keep up to $11.50 per suit and give big values. Union made. Perfect fit and customer satisfaction guaranteed or money back.
SEND NO MONEY—Get FREE Outfit
We furnish complete selling outfit of over 100 big actual samples, full color style portfolio, and all supplies in swell display traveling case. Absolutely no cost. Write for it today and start earning bonus Suit or Pants and big cash profits at once. Act now.
O. K. TAILORING CO.
325 S. Market St., Dept. 103, Chicago 6, Ill.

How to MAKE MONEY with Simple CARTOONS
A book everyone who likes to draw should have. It is free; no obligation. Simply address
FREE BOOK
CARTOONISTS' EXCHANGE
Dept. 74 Pleasant Hill, Ohio

New FALSE PLATE for OLD IN 24 HOURS
Low As Only $15.95
Wonderful New Scientific Method Transforms OLD, LOOSE, Cracked or Chipped Plates into LUSTROUS BEAUTY-PINK DUPONT PLASTIC PLATES
MONEY BACK GUARANTEE
Why envy beautiful false teeth of others? We will transform your old, loose, cracked or chipped plate into a beautiful new lightweight DuPont Beauty-Pink Plastic Plate, using your own teeth. All missing and broken teeth matched and replaced. Your cost amazingly low; actually save many dollars. No impression needed under our new scientific False Plate Method, 24-Hour Service.
SEND NO MONEY Enjoy life again, and save money on beautiful, new, natural-looking plastic plate. Rush name, address for full details sent FREE! If your plate is loose, we show you how to make it comfortable, tight-fitting before duplication.
West Dental Laboratory, 127 N. Dearborn St., Dept. D-45, Chicago 2, Ill.

ACCOUNTANT
BECOME AN EXPERT
Executive Accountants and C. P. A's earn $4,000 to $10,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. We train you thoroly at home in spare time for C. P. A's examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C. P. A's. Placement counsel and help. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays."
LASALLE Extension University, 417 So. Dearborn St.
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 4329H Chicago 5, Ill.

Special FISHING LINES YOUR CHOICE FOR $1.00
500 Ft. 2 Ply Nylon 25 lb. test
Level Fly Line, size E or D. 75 ft.
FLIES ASSORTED 10 for $1.00
P & K Fly Reel Litewelght—1.00
125 Ft. 3 Ply Nylon 110 Lb Test
250 Ft. 3 Ply Nylon 45 lb. test
BRAIDED NYLON FISHING LINES
200' 15 or 20 lb. Test | 150' 50 lb. Test | 100' 100 lb. Test
175' 35 lb. Test | 125' 75 lb. Test | 50' 200 lb. Test
Above lines available in longer lengths.
Send check or money order. We pay postage.
MAC-MILLS Dept. T-4 Pleasant Valley, N. Y.

comes to the creek and brands his unbranded calves."

"I see. He'll claim he caught him using a running iron."

"That's what Lane has expected him to do. Westover is strong around here and he could get away with it. If he doesn't suceed now, he'll try again. He won't give up until Lane's gone—"

A burst of gunfire interrupted her, and they both jerked their horses to a stop and sat listening. The shot came from somewhere in the trees about an eighth of a mile ahead. They heard perhaps a dozen or more sporadic shots, and a moment later a single final one., Then there was silence.

As the silence lengthened and became ominous, the girl's face blanched. "The shack is right up there in the trees," she said in a strained voice. "I wonder—"

"He's probably all right," Renfrow assured her. "Now you stay out here. Get further out in the open so you'll have a good head start on anybody that might see you."

Without waiting for an answer, he spurred his horse forward through the tall grass, turning him more toward the hillside as he ran. In a matter of moments the horse had come out on the edge of the grass where oaks grew down the steep hillside.

Here was a path leading toward the tree-bordered creek, and Renfrow spurred his horse into a dead run. The path left the open ground and twisted through the light timber. He heard the shouts of several men ahead. but he had no caution now and pushed his mount through the trees until he found himself in a clearing with a log cabin in the center.

He took in the whole picture as he yanked his horse to a stop and slid out of his saddle in one swift movement. Two men were standing over a man who lay prone in the clearing. A third man afoot was walking toward the others from the direction of three saddled horses which grazed back of the house.

The walking man saw Renfrow first and lifted his gun. He got it out of holster, but

he was dead before he pulled the trigger. Renfrow's weapon had roared just once.

The other men spun in their tracks, dragging for their guns. Renfrow's second bullet got one of the men in the shoulder, sending him and his weapon spinning in the dirt. The third man fired two panicky shots and bolted for his horse. The man with the shoulder wound pulled himself up with the aid of a tree stump and staggered toward his animal.

Renfrow had them dead to rights. He lifted his gun and lined the wounded man up in its sights. Why not? The man was a paid killer. But he could not pull his trigger on an injured and unarmed man.

He turned the weapon toward the other man who had vaulted into the saddle and had got the horse turned toward the woods. His sights came down square on the man's back—and again he could not pull the trigger.

IT WAS an odd thought that came to him in that moment while these killers were escaping to safety. It had something to do with what Martha had said to him, something she had said while she was telling him what was wrong with him. He couldn't remember what it was, though.

His lips opened in a cold smile. "She should be here and see Lane lying there dead," he said to himself. "And see me letting that pair ride away."

In another minute, still with his gun in his hand, he was across the clearing and down on his knees over Lane Gault, he was looking for signs of life in the motionless body before him.

Gault was a tall man whose yellow hair was now matted with blood. There was a splotch of blood on the side of his shirt, wth a bullet hole marking the center of it, and there was blood seeping from another bullet hole in his thigh.

Then Sally came up behind Renfrow. She stood with her rifle under her arm, looking down at her brother-in-law, her lips tight. She did not speak, and it struck Renfrow that she was an unusual girl, not to ask the obvious question as he felt

[*Turn page*]

LEOPARD SEAT COVERS
SWEEP TO SENSATIONAL NATIONAL POPULARITY

Salesmen jamming pockets with 10^{00} bills...
TAKING ORDERS FOR KEY EXPERTLY Tailored AUTO SEAT COVERS

9 Styles

Look at These Features
- 9 STYLES—9 PRICE RANGES
- A COMPLETE LINE OF SENSATIONAL NEW DESIGNS
- FOR ALL CARS—ALL MAKES —MODELS—YEARS

BIG SEASON NOW STARTING!

You've heard of the tremendous demand for Leopard auto seat covers that built up overnight from one end of the country to the other when Cadillac introduced a new 1950 model with Leopard Seat Covers. Car owners are paying $50.00 to $60.00 and $70.00 ... and more for covers with Leopard design. Now you can serve that eager demand at a fraction of the cost the customers expect to pay! No wonder salesmen are making money hand over fist with this sensational new Key line!

Make big money daily. Take orders from car owners everywhere. Beat all competition with covers cut to accurate patterns like the finest suit of clothes ... Slick, smooth, wrinkle-free fit adds an accent of elegance to any car ... just like an original upholstery job!

RUSH NAME FOR FREE OUTFIT Give Make, Year and Model Of Your Car

Anyone working full or spare time can realize big money in this business. No need to search for prospects. Every car owner is one. Be the first to cash in ... Make year around STEADY PROFITS. Don't put it off—get your Free Selling Kit at once for some real money. ACTUAL SEAT COVERS GIVEN FREE TO PRODUCERS FOR OWN USE! Write for full details!

KEY PRODUCTS CORP.
Dept. 344
800 N. Clark, Chicago 10, Ill.

RUPTURED?
Get Relief This Proven Way

Why try to worry along with trusses that gouge your flesh—press heavily on hips and spine—enlarge opening—fail to hold rupture? You need the Cluthe. No leg-straps or cutting belts. Automatic adjustable pad holds at real opening—follows every body movement with instant increased support in case of strain. Cannot slip whether at work or play. Light. Waterproof. Can be worn in bath. Send for amazing FREE book, "Advice To Ruptured," and details of liberal truthful 60-day trial offer. Also endorsements from grateful users in your neighborhood. Write: CLUTHE SONS, Dept. 33, Bloomfield, New Jersey

Free Yourself FROM Tobacco Habit

If you want to stop smoking and just can't, try world-famous NO-TO-BAC Lozenges. See how quickly NO-TO-BAC may help stop your craving for tobacco. Rush $1 to NO-TO-BAC, for 7 days supply. (For heavy smokers—16 days' supply—$2.) Satisfaction guaranteed or money back. Write:

NO-TO-BAC CO.
DEPT. S HEWLETT, NEW YORK

Borrow $50 to $600 BY MAIL

Confidential Loan Service

Need money? No matter where you live, you can borrow BY MAIL, $50 to $600 this easy, quick confidential way. No endorsers needed. Employed men and women of good character eligible. Solve your money problems quickly and in complete privacy with a loan made by mail. Employer, relatives and friends will not know you're applying for a loan. Convenient monthly payments. Rush coupon—giving occupation—for Application Blank sent FREE in plain envelope. There's no obligation.

STATE FINANCE CO., 323 Securities Bldg. Dept. H-82 OMAHA 2, NEBRASKA

No Endorsers
REPAY ON EASY TERMS
Quick! Easy! PRIVATE

STATE FINANCE CO., Dept. H-82,
323 Securities Bldg., Omaha 2, Nebraska
Please rush FREE Application Blank.

NAME_____
ADDRESS_____
CITY_____ STATE_____
*Occupation*_____ *Age*_____
*Amount you want to borrow $*_____

QUIT TOBACCO!

Remove all tobacco craving scientifically in every form and join the thousands who have completely obtained satisfactory freedom from tobacco with the old genuine TOBACCO BANISHER. Send for FREE BOOKLET describing the ill effects of tobacco, and a safe reliable home treatment. A proven success for 39 years.

GUSTAF H. GUSTAFSON CO.
2325 E. Vickery Blvd. Dept. TF. Ft. Worth 3, Texas

TOMBSTONES DIRECT TO YOU

$14.95 up
•EASY TERMS

Genuine Beautiful **Rockdale Monuments, Markers.** Satisfaction or MONEY BACK. Freight paid. Write for our **FREE** Catalog and compare prices.

ROCKDALE MONUMENT CO.
Dept. 235 JOLIET, ILLINOIS

MAKE MONEY LENDING

AMAZING ATTACHMENT TURNS OLD REFRIGERATORS INTO AUTOMATIC DEFROSTERS—Never before a sales plan like this. No "Selling." *Lend* the **Magic Defroster** to any woman who has an old refrigerator. Then try to take it away. She'll buy every-time rather than give up the labor saving, mess saving invention. **SENT FREE.** Rush name for complete information on lending plan and offer of **SAMPLE for DEMONSTRATING.** Make as high as $5.00 on every "loan" you make. Mail your name today sure for free offer.

MAXILUME CO., 125 Hubbard, Dept. D-88-D, Chicago 10, Ill.

Picture Your Relief

FROM THE DISTRESS OF ASTHMA ATTACKS

You will no longer dread the agonizing symptoms of bronchial asthma once you discover Dr. K. Schiffmann's ASTHMADOR...the quality-blended formula that acts to relieve congestion...helps make breathing easier. Ask your druggist today for famous

ASTHMADOR

in powder, cigarette or pipe mixture form

the pulse of the unconscious man.

He discovered a beat in the wrist and in the neck vein, and said, "He's still alive. The rib wound and the leg wound aren't serious. The bullet that hit his head just creased him. It's probably a light concussion that's keeping him unconscious."

"Can we move him?" she asked.

"I don't think it would make things worse," he answered. "We'll have to risk taking him to a doctor. Would you bring the horses?"

While the girl went after the horses, Renfrow went to the stream and brought back a hatful of water with which he bathed Gault's head and wrists. A little more work brought Gault back to a state of semiconsciousness.

Between them, Sally and Renfrow got Gault into Renfrow's saddle, and Renfrow got up behind him so that he could hold him in. A sudden thought brought the girl to his side.

"We can't take him to town," she said. "Westover has his headquarters there. He'll get him sure."

"We can't take him home," Renfrow said. "Do you know the shortest trail to town?"

"It's up through the woods," the girl said, turning to her horse. "It'll be dark, but I can get you there. Just follow me."

It was near midnight when they reached town and got the doctor to work on Gault, and it was breaking daylight before Gault's wounds were dressed and he was resting easily under a sedative.

Renfrow took Sally out onto the porch, and they stood there in silence while the gray of dawn faded over the prairie before them. The girl seemed to be weighted down by her thoughts.

Renfrow said. "I didn't get to thank you. I saw you in the edge of the clearing out there, covering those gunnies with your rifle. You shouldn't have risked it."

She looked at him squarely. "I wasn't covering them, Jim. I was covering you!"

"Me?" he echoed. "Why me?"

"Because you love Martha, and you

came here to kill Lane for marrying her. I'd have killed you if you had tried it."

He saw the seriousness in her. "I believe you would," he said. "But I told you to forget that."

"Why? They've got enough trouble as it is."

As Renfrow made his answer, he knew that he was telling himself as well as Sally a truth he had not known until this moment.

"Sally, I like Martha, but I don't love her. I was just in love with my own pride. I had to come here to find that out, but I know it now. So I haven't anything to hold against Lane."

The girl's attitude underwent a complete change, and suddenly she was the warm friendly person he had known back on the home range.

The light of the sun was coming more brightly now. The fog had thinned out on the hillside and what was left of it had rolled down and hung over the prairie like a sea of soft gray velvet.

Renfrow walked out to his horse, and took his gun belt off his saddle horn and buckled it around his waist. The girl laid a hand on his arm.

"What are you going to do, Jim?" she asked gravely.

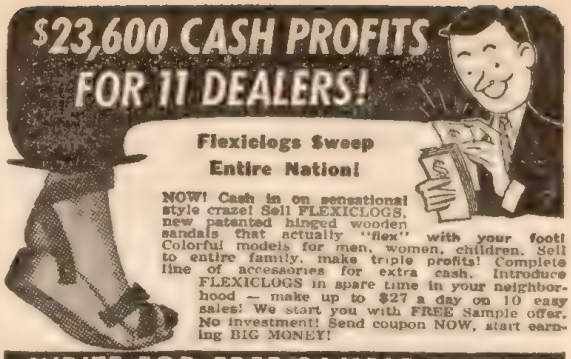
He saw the concern in her eyes. "I believe you are like Martha," he answered. "You have the idea that I'm only looking for excuses to kill somebody."

"I don't think that, Jim," she answered. "I was just a kid when you were around back home, but I knew how you felt when your dad was killed. I'd have gone and done the same thing you did. There are times when a person has to stand up for himself."

"And for his friends," Renfrow said. "I'll see you later."

HE LEFT her and walked through the growing early light in the direction of the stores. Men were awake and going about their business. Renfrow identified the building Sally had mentioned as Westover's headquarters and started across the street toward it.

[*Turn page*]


$23,600 CASH PROFITS
FOR 11 DEALERS!
Flexiclogs Sweep
Entire Nation!
NOW! Cash in on sensational style craze! Sell FLEXICLOGS, new patented hinged wooden sandals that actually "flex" with your foot! Colorful models for men, women, children. Sell to entire family, make triple profits! Complete line of accessories for extra cash. Introduce FLEXICLOGS in spare time in your neighborhood — make up to $27 a day on 10 easy sales! We start you with FREE Sample offer. No investment! Send coupon NOW, start earning BIG MONEY!

WRITE FOR FREE SAMPLE OFFER!

FLEXICLOGS, Box TF-4
New Holstein, Wisconsin

Rush Free Sample Offer so I can introduce Flexiclogs and pocket lots of EXTRA DOLLARS right away!

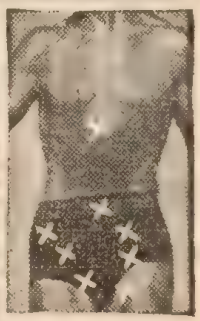
Name .....

Address .....

Town .....State .....

SUFFERERS FROM PSORIASIS
SCALY SKIN TROUBLE!
MAKE THE ONE SPOT TEST
Use DERMOIL
DERMOIL
PSORIASIS
Prove it yourself no matter how long you have suffered or what you have tried. Beautiful book on psoriasis and Dermoil with amazing, true photographic proof of results sent FREE. Write for it.
Don't mistake eczema for the stubborn ugly, embarrassing scaly skin disease Psoriasis. Apply non-staining Dermoil. Thousands do for scaly spots on body or scalp. Grateful users, often after years of suffering, report the scales have gone, the red patches gradually disappeared and they enjoyed the thrill of a clear skin again. Dermoil is used by many doctors and is backed by a positive agreement to give definite benefit in 2 weeks or money is refunded without question. Send 10c (stamps or coin) for generous trial bottle to make our famous "One Spot Test". Test it yourself. Results may surprise you. Write today for your test bottle. Caution: Use only as directed. Print name plainly. Don't delay. Sold by Liggett and Walgreen Drug Stores and other leading Druggists. LAKE LABORATORIES, Box 3925, Strathmoor Station, Dept. 750, Detroit 27, Mich.
SEND FOR GENEROUS TRIAL SIZE

LOOK
for Rupture Help



Try a Brooks Patented Air Cushion appliance. This marvelous invention for most forms of reducible rupture is GUARANTEED to bring YOU heavenly comfort and security—day and night—at work and at play—or it costs you NOTHING! Thousands happy. Light, neat-fitting. No hard pads or springs. For men, women, and children. Durable, cheap. **Sent on trial to prove it.** Not sold in stores. Beware of imitations. Write for Free Book on Rupture, no-risk trial order plan, and Proof of Results. Ready for you NOW!

BROOKS APPLIANCE CO., 391 State St., Marshall, Mich.

RUN A SPARE TIME
GIFT SHOP AT HOME

Make money and friends with sensational Gift line. Then double profits with America's greatest line of All Occasion Greeting Cards. Boxes include Birthday, Get-Well, Anniversary, Congratulation Cards. Everyone buys! No experience needed. We show you how. Actual items sent on approval. Send no money. Send name TODAY!

GENERAL CARD CO., 1300 W. Jackson Blvd., Dept. 70-D, Chicago 7, Ill.

CHOKED with stomach GAS?

THANK HEAVENS! Most attacks are just acid indigestion. When it strikes, take Bell-ans tablets. They contain the fastest-acting medicines known to doctors for the relief of heartburn, gas and similar distress. 25c.

FREE package. Write

BELL-ANS, Dept. X, Orangeburg, N. Y.

HE-MAN VOICE!

STRENGTHEN your voice this tested scientific way. Yes—you may now be able to improve the POWER of your speaking and singing voice . . . in the privacy of your own room! Selftraining lessons, mostly silent. No music required.

FREE BOOK Write TODAY for Eugene Feuchtinger's great booklet "How to Develop a Successful Voice." It's absolutely FREE! You must state your age. Booklet mailed postpaid in plain wrapper. No salesman will call. Send your name and age RIGHT NOW!

PREFECT VOICE INSTITUTE
210 S. Clinton St. Studio D-6, Chicago 6, Ill.

MEN and WOMEN! LEARN SELF DEFENSE

Protect yourself against ANY attacker! Top authority, Lt. Comdr. Wesley Brown, U.S.N., gives complete easy instructions with photos. Section for women. MONEY BACK GUARANTEE. Send $1.50 to BARNES, Dept. 236, 232 Madison, N.Y.16

STOP TOBACCO

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write Today for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved over 300,000 people. FREE BOOK

In Business Since 1909
THE NEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton Sta. • St. Louis 5, Mo.

BE A DETECTIVE

WORK HOME or TRAVEL. Experience unnecessary. DETECTIVE Particulars FREE. Write GEO. T. H. WAGNER, 125 W. 86th St., N. Y.

EAR ACHE?

DENT'S

EAR WAX DROPS for fast temporary relief of accumulated wax condition

TOOTHACHE?

ask your druggist for DENT'S TOOTH GUM, TOOTH DROPS or POULTICE

FREE—Amazing Book on RHEUMATISM, ARTHRITIS

If you suffer the aches, pains and discomforts of Rheumatism, as manifested in ARTHRITIS, NEURITIS, SCIATICA or LUMBAGO, send today for the FREE Book. It reveals important facts about why drugs and medicine give only temporary relief without removing causes. Explains fully a proven, specialized system of treatment that may save you years of distress. No obligation. Write for this FREE Book today!
BALL CLINIC, Dept. 504, Excelsior Springs, Mo.

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 60. Many Swedish Massage graduates make big money! Large full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. Prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma. Anatomy charts and 32-page Illustrated Book FREE!

The College of Swedish Massage
Dept. 263-D 41 E. Pearson, Chicago 11

A sweated, saddled horse was tied in front of the building. As Renfrow approached, a man opened the door and came out of the building. Renfrow and the man recognized each other at the same time. He was the gunman who had escaped the battle out at the line shack, and he stood frozen in his tracks.

Renfrow stopped in the middle of the street. "Tell Westover I want to see him."

The man stood hesitant a moment, then he turned and went inside. In a moment Westover came out of his office, his pink face freshly shaven. There was arrogance in his every move.

"Westover," Renfrow said, "you've already found out how I feel about the way you do things. I just wanted to tell you that I'll be around from now on, looking out for Gault's interests and my own. You know what to expect. What are you going to do about it?"

Westover stepped from the board sidewalk, landing heavily on spread feet in the dust. His arrogance broke the leash, and he shouted angrily, "I'll show you."

Renfrow saw with a kind of detached surprise that Westover's hand was moving with uncanny speed as he reached for his gun. The big man's nickel-plated Colt was out of his holster when the roar of Renfrow's gun cut the movement short.

Westover's legs were carrying his heavy body forward in mincing steps, and then they could no longer support his weight. He fell forward in the dust with his smoking gun under him.

Renfrow went forward and stood over him and saw that he was dead. This time, as he looked down on the man he had killed, he did not experience the old familiar bitterness. He felt a sadness in him that it had had to be done. He felt a little sorry for the man whose arrogance had led him to destruction.

LAW

STUDY AT HOME for Business Success and LARGER PERSONAL EARNINGS. 43 years expert instruction — over 114,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All text material furnished. Easy payment plan. Send for FREE BOOK.

AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. T-49 646 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago 11, Illinois

He went into Westover's office, holding his gun before him, and found the line-camp rider backed into a corner with fear in his eyes.

Renfrow said, "Your paymaster is lying out there in the street. You've got five minutes to ride out of town and tell your bunkmates to get out of the country. After that, you're all fair game. Get going."

He followed the man out, watched him make a trail of dust out of town, then pouched his weapon and walked back to the doctor's house.

Sally came off the porch to meet him. He thought—though he admitted that it might be wishful thinking—that he saw relief in her face as she looked her question at him.

"Westover won't be bothering you," he said simply.

The doctor's yard was on a ledge, and they stood together in the bright morning and looked out over the prairie below. The fog had lifted now, and the whole expanse of dew-covered grass was a carpet of diamonds sparkling in the rising sun.

"Tell you what I'm going to do," Renfrow said. "I like this country. I'm going out and take care of things for Lane till he gets on his feet, then I'm going to find me a spot and build me a herd here. You know the lay of the land around here. Maybe you'd be willing to kind of show me around. Maybe you could suggest a good place to build a house and fix up a home?"

He caught a brief, half quizzical, half shy glance from her before she looked away. "Why there are lots of places that would do," she answered. "I might be able to help you find just what you wanted."

COMING

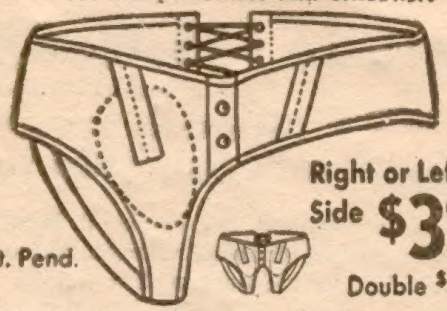
GUNS FOR GERONIMO

Immediate Comfort And Relief for You with

RUPTURE-EASER

(A PIPER BRACE PRODUCT)

for MEN, WOMEN and CHILDREN



Pat. Pend.

Right or Left Side $3.95

Double $4.95

A strong, form fitting washable support designed to give you relief and comfort. Adjustable back-lacing and adjustable leg straps. Snaps up in front. Soft flat groin pad—**NO STEEL OR LEATHER BANDS.** Unexcelled for comfort, **INVISIBLE UNDER LIGHT CLOTHING.** Washable. Also used as after operation support.

- **THE MOST EFFECTIVE HERNIA SUPPORT.** Thousands of people who have tried old-fashioned, expensive devices turn to Rupture-Easer for new comfort.
- **RUPTURE-EASER IS SANITARY.** Can be washed without harm to fabric — you never offend when you wear Rupture-Easer.
- **NO FITTING REQUIRED.** Just measure around the lowest part of the abdomen and specify right or left side or double.

Over 300,000 Grateful Users

R. C. of Corvallis, Oregon, Air Mails: *"Send me another Rupture-Easer so I will have one to change off with. It is enabling me to work at top speed at my press machine 8 hours a day."*

M. S. of Anderson, Ind., thanks us and says: *"It is one of the finest things I have ever worn and has made my life worth living. It has given me untold ease and comfort."*

O. B. R. of Boston: *"Send me another . . . I wish to say to everyone who suffers as I did, 'Oh what relief I have found from its help!' "*

Blessed Relief Day and Night—You can sleep in it—you can work in it—you can bathe in it.

10-DAY TRIAL OFFER

Money-back guarantee if you don't get relief

Piper Brace Company, Dept. TF-42

811 Wyandotte, Kansas City 6, Mo.

PIPER BRACE CO., DEPT TF-42
811 Wyandotte, Kansas City 6, Mo.
Please send my RUPTURE-EASER by return mail.

Right Side	☐ $3.95	Measure around lowest part of
Left Side	☐ $3.95	my abdomen
Double	☐ $4.95	is ..... INCHES.

(Note: Be sure to give Size and Side when ordering.)
We Prepay Postage except on C.O.D.'s.
Enclosed is: ☐ Money Order ☐ Check for $..... ☐ Send C.O.D.

Name.....

Address.....

City and State.....

RUSH THIS COUPON NOW!

WHETHER YOU ARE 15 OR 75 . . . READ THIS IMPORTANT MESSAGE

New Sickness and Accident Benefits Include $25 Weekly Payment Feature

Costs Only $12 a Year — Down Payment $2.50
Ages 60 to 69 Only $18 a Year — Ages 70 to 75 Only $24 a Year

The older you are, the harder it is to get protection against financial worries that come when accident or sickness strikes. That's why the reliable North American Accident Insurance Company of Chicago has issued a special policy for men and women up to 75 years of age. It helps meet sudden doctor and hospital bills — and the cost is only $12 a year for both men and women from 15 to 59 years old . . . only $18 a year from 60 to 69 years . . . from ages 70 to 75 only $24 a year. Easy payment plan if desired.

No doctor's examination required, merely your own statement as to your present health. If your policy is in effect at age 75, you may even continue it to age 80 at no further increase in premium. ABSOLUTELY NO REDUCTION IN BENEFITS REGARDLESS OF AGE. Protects you 24 hours a day.

This is the popular, sound "SERIES 500" Limited Accident and Sickness Policy which thousands of men and women are carrying, all over the country — it pays $25 a week for 10 weeks for total disability resulting from certain specified accidents and sicknesses; AN ADDITIONAL $25 A WEEK for 4 weeks for accidents requiring hospital confinement; up to $25 cash for doctor bills (at the rate of $3 per visit) even for a minor accident such as a cut finger. In case of accidental death the policy pays $1,000.00 cash to your beneficiary. Accident benefits effective from date of policy. Sickness benefits effective 30 days from date of policy.

In addition, the policy covers many sicknesses including pneumonia, cancer, diabetes, tuberculosis, polio, ulcer of stomach or intestines, and operation for removal of appendix, hemorrhoids, gall bladder, kidney and prostate, paying the weekly benefit after the first seven days of confinement to either home or hospital.

This new policy also has a double indemnity feature covering travel accidents. You receive $50 a week if disabled by an accident in a bus, taxicab, train, subway or street car, and $75 a week if the accident requires hospital confinement. The death benefit increases to $2,000.00 if caused by a travel accident.

Your benefits are never reduced even though you are also insured in a Group Plan, Blue Cross or other Hospitalization Insurance. So if you are now a member of some worthy hospitalization plan, you still need this additional protection. Only a small percentage of people are confined to a hospital, and even then only for a fraction of the time they are disabled. Most people — over 80% — are confined at home where hospitalization plans do not apply. Or, they are hospitalized for a few days or a week, then spend weeks of convalescence at home before they can go back to work again. The North American Policy pays specified benefits regardless of whether you are confined to your home or to a hospital.

North American Accident Insurance Company of Chicago has been in business for more than sixty-five years, and is one of the largest sickness and accident companies with assets of over $19,000,000.00. It has paid out many millions to grateful policyholders when they needed help most. North American is licensed by the Insurance Departments of all 48 States and the District of Columbia.

Whatever your age, whether you are young or old, you need this sensible, necessary protection. Get full details about this new policy by sending for the revealing booklet, "Cash or Sympathy." The booklet is absolutely free. It will be mailed without charge or obligation of any kind. We suggest you get your free copy by mailing the coupon to Premier Policy Division, North American Accident Insurance Co. of Chicago, 830 Broad Street, Dept. 825, Newark 2, New Jersey.

MAIL THIS COUPON FOR FREE BOOKLET

North American Accident Insurance Co. of Chicago — Premier Policy Division
830 Broad St., Dept. 825, Newark 2, New Jersey

Please mail me your FREE booklet, "CASH OR SYMPATHY." I understand there is absolutely no obligation.

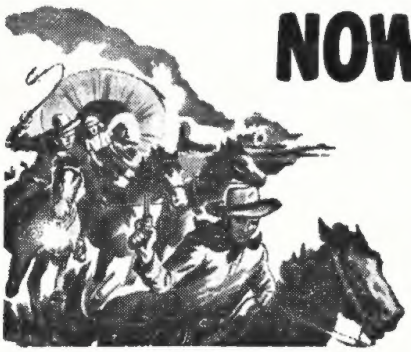
NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ ZONE No._____ STATE_____

—Continued from Back Cover

AMAZING OFFER TO READERS OF THIS MAGAZINE



NOW—Yours to enjoy for a Lifetime!

The Thrilling Works of The Great ZANE GREY!

WHO can read Zane Grey's tales and not be swept away by their colorful action, their breath-taking thrills, their blood-tingling excitement? Here are fearless men and the women they fought for; ruthless desperadoes and trigger-quick outlaws. Here is the roar of blazing guns—and the awe-inspiring silence of prairie and canyon.

Here is the savage West, where greed and passion struggled for power; where men and women rode roughshod over raw danger and threatening death. You do not merely read these books; you share in these pulse-pounding adventures.

All the Glory of the Old West — Its Sweeping Action, Color and Romance — Recaptured in Beautiful Volumes Your Family Will Be Proud to Own

HERE is an amazing opportunity! Now you can bring into your home *The Collected Works of ZANE GREY* — in beautiful matched volumes, "Golden West De Luxe Editions."

How proud you will be to display these luxurious volumes — gorgeously bound in buckram and sturdy cloth. Yet, because of a tremendous printing, they come to you for less than the price of *ordinary* books!

Just picture them in your home — and imagine the world of pleasure they will open up to your family! The partial list that follows gives you only an inkling of the thrills that await you:

1. RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE. See description on other side.

2. THE THUNDERING HERD. The glorious days of the Texas hide-hunters—fearless men answering the wildness of the range with flaming guns!

3. WILDFIRE. The tempestuous story of a great wild stallion, a fiery girl — and the man who was strong enough to tame them both!

4. ARIZONA AMES. His blazing six-shooter spread terror in the hearts of the toughest badmen!

5. SHADOW ON THE TRAIL. Quick-shooting Wade Holden fights with rawhide - tough rustlers.

6. ROGUE RIVER FEUD. Violence and death on Rogue River, where men stopped at nothing to win the high stakes of the rich salmon runs.

7. DESERT GOLD. Spine-tingling adventures of men and women crazed by the lure of riches.

8. WEST OF THE PECOS. Into this land of the lawless came a straight-shooting young man — who turned out to be a *girl!*

9. THE LIGHT OF WESTERN STARS. Mighty epic of warfare on the border, throbbing with excitement!

10. CALL OF THE CANYON. Smashing drama of death and danger — racing to a climax that leaves you breathless!

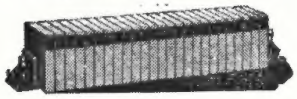
11. 30,000 ON THE HOOF. Pioneer Logan Huett battles against screaming Indians and lawless rustlers in this gun-bristling saga of Old Arizona.

The other great volumes are listed on the other side. Every one is complete —not one thrilling word is cut!

SEND NO MONEY

Send no money! Just mail the RESERVATION CARD to examine the first volume, RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE. With it will come a readers' invoice for $1.89 as complete payment, plus a few cents mailing charge, and instructions on how to get your other beautiful volumes.

There are positively no other charges. No "fee," no "deposit" in advance. First come, first served. Send in the Reservation Card NOW! BLACK'S READERS SERVICE CO., Suite 1000, One Park Avenue, New York 16, N. Y.



Truly Luxurious Books!

Picture these magnificent books in your home! Bound in handsome buckram and cloth, in glowing shades of red, tan, and blue. Stamped in genuine gold, with tinted page tops, colored end-papers, decorative head and foot bands. Truly superb books for your lifetime library!

YOUR FIRST BOOK IS NOW READY
MAIL RESERVATION CARD NOW!

READER'S RESERVATION CARD

BLACK'S READERS SERVICE COMPANY
Suite 1000
1 Park Avenue, New York 16, N. Y.

N.S.

Please reserve in my name the books listed in your generous offer to readers of this magazine—the luxuriously-bound "Golden West De Luxe Editions" of Zane Grey. Send me at once the first book, RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE. I enclose NO MONEY IN ADVANCE; but within one week I will send you only $1.89, plus a few cents mailing charge—and I will be entitled to receive each following handsome De Luxe volun e as it comes from the press, at the same low price, sending no money in advance. *(Books shipped in U.S.A. only.)*

NAME.....
(Please Print Plainly)

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... *STATE*.....

AMAZING OFFER TO READERS OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE COLLECTED WORKS OF

ZANE GREY

IN ONE MAGNIFICENT, MATCHED LIBRARY SERIES

The New "Golden West Deluxe Edition"

28,000,000 Readers Have Thrilled to These Exciting Works, and to Those Listed on the Other Side!

Twin Sombreros • Robbers' Roost • Wild Horse Mesa • To the Last Man • Western Union • Thunder Mountain • Fighting Caravans • Under the Tonto Rim • The Mysterious Rider • The Hash Knife Outfit • The Man of the Forest • The Vanishing American • Shepherd of Guadaloupe • The Heritage of the Desert

Now Ready!

Your First Volume in This De Luxe Library

RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE

Fiery gun fights; wild chases; hairbreadth escapes; the raw beauty and vast silence of the plains —the whole colorful epoch of the pioneer! Against this backdrop of blazing action, a mysterious rider and the girl he loves gamble their lives in the winning of the West! An unsurpassed picture of the wild frontier days!

Continued on Other Side

FIRST CLASS
PERMIT NO. 54048
(Sec. 34.9, P. L. & R.)
New York, N. Y.

BUSINESS REPLY CARD
No Postage Stamp Necessary if Mailed in the United States

4c POSTAGE WILL BE PAID BY

BLACK'S READERS SERVICE COMPANY
SUITE 1000
ONE PARK AVENUE
N.S. NEW YORK 16, N. Y.